

# **Processes of Improvisation in Change Management from the perspective of a UK management consultant**

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## **Abstract**

**Key words:** Improvisation, power, performativity, organisational change, systems thinking, gender, sexuality

**Key authors:** J. Butler, G.H. Mead, M. Foucault, N. Elias, K. Johnstone, M.P. Cunha, F. Barrett, R. Stacey, C. Mowles, J. Seddon.

Organisational improvisation is often seen as a way for corporations to be able to cope with emergent strategies (Cunha, et al, 1999) and a way to meet the challenges of modern ways of working which include agility, flexibility and responsiveness (Vera and Crossan, 2004). However, seeing improvisation as a tool that can be used to deliver desirable organisational change is placing it within a discourse of systemic consultancy techniques that are predicated on assumptions about organisational change which I argue do not reflect the everyday lived experiences of people at work.

As a management consultant, I have worked with many organisations using tools and techniques in an attempt to deliver prescribed outcomes. However, these never seemed to turn out as expected, for my colleagues or myself. Through my research I have understood that organisational change is far more pluralistic and uncontrollable than is suggested by systems thinkers like Seddon (2003; 2008) because consultants or managers could never predict with certainty how change initiatives would play out.

I build on Mead's model of communication (1934) where a gesture to another evokes a similar response in the gesturer as it does the responder as part of the whole social act. In doing so I argue that improvisation is a way of describing communicative interaction between human bodies which are interdependent and therefore in relations of power with one another. As groups and individuals we become invested in and caught up in organisational games where many different groups struggle against one another in an attempt to control the game and get what they want. As these improvisational moves in the game are played, narrative themes that organise our experience are both sustained and contested at the same time. But these narrative

patterns are not solely about working practices or procedures but also include wider aspects of identity such as gender and sexuality, which are interwoven in our organisational lives. Specifically I am arguing that communication is not just one body gesturing and responding to another, but one *sexed and gendered* body gesturing and responding to another sexed and gendered body and this affects our interactions, assumptions and understanding of what it is we are doing together. These improvisations which both create and maintain narrative themes emerge through the paradox of the rehearsed and the unrehearsed at the spontaneous moment of performance, where the anticipation of an audience's reaction, represented by Mead's concept of the generalised other (1934: 154), both enables and constrains one's performance.

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For Adrian  
and  
in loving memory of Doug

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## **Introduction**

Improvisation is a treacherous activity. There is always the possibility that one will make a mistake. Perhaps one will attempt to play a passage that is incoherent or beyond one's grasp; maybe one's ideas will not meld with others and will lead to collective chaos.

(Barrett, 1998b: 283)

In this thesis I have researched my practice as a change management consultant working in the UK. Throughout the time I have conducted my research I have been working with leaders and managers in public and private sector organisations attempting to implement changes and deliver improvements to organisational practices. When I began my research, most of my work was commissioned through Roundphase Consulting, an organisation that my company had signed an exclusivity agreement with. This meant that I could not work for anyone else or any other company directly, but received work as a consequence of my membership of Roundphase. However, as described in detail in project two, I found the rigorous enforcement of procedures in the consultancy firm paralysed my improvisational practice so I terminated the agreement I had with them. Project three and four describe my experiences as a freelance consultant, working independently with a couple of public sector organisations.

The theme of my research, which has emerged from an inquiry into my practice, is processes of improvisation in change management. I will explain here in the introduction briefly, what improvisation is, why existing understandings of it are incomplete and how I have come to see it as a cornerstone of my practice.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines improvisation as “the action of improvising...something that is improvised, in particular a piece of music, drama, etc. created spontaneously or without preparation” (Stevenson, 2010: 880).

Improvisation has a long history in performative disciplines, particularly theatre and music. However, interest in researching improvisation in organisations appears to have gained interest in the late 1990s, with the journal *Organization Science* dedicating a special issue in September 1998 to organisational improvisation. Since

then, as I have described in detail in project three of this thesis, research about organisational improvisation has continued to rely heavily on metaphors from jazz (Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha, 2003: 2023) and improvisational theatre (Hadida and Tarvainen, 2014: 1). It is partly for these reasons that I am arguing that our understanding of processes of improvisation in organisations is incomplete. Musicians or actors improvising for an audience are putting on a performance, one that I would argue they want to be a ‘good’ performance that entertains and encourages audiences to give the performers good reviews and return to see them again. Barrett describes the effort jazz musicians put into practicing in order to perform well (1998b: 283) and Johnstone (1981) created techniques to support actors to improve their improvisational performances, precisely for these reasons. Therefore, relying on jazz and improvisational theatre as sources of understanding about improvisation leads to examining it from a perspective where some techniques are regarded as delivering a ‘good’ performance and should be encouraged whilst others, such as blocking action, are discouraged. This means activities that are regarded as delivering a ‘poor’ performance, which maintain the status quo, are therefore not fully examined as improvisational as they are regarded as the repertoire of the inexperienced performer who requires more practice.

However, whilst I agree that some improvisational activity in organisations also relies on experience, it is not as simple as putting on a ‘good’ performance that leads to changes, versus a ‘bad’ performance where no change occurs. Rather I suggest, as Stacey does, that improvisation is a way of describing the interdependent nature of human interaction that is taking place between people all the time in organisations (2006: 124). I argue here that processes of improvisation in organisations occur between people as they communicate with each other from which organisational change may or may not arise. As we communicate and interact with each other in all situations of human relating, there is always some inherent uncertainty about how the other person will respond which therefore requires some improvised, spontaneous action in turn to respond back. Here there is a parallel with jazz, as Barrett describes “when jazz players are improvising, they can never know for sure what their colleagues will play. They have to respond to the enactments they hear as they are happening” (1998b: 285) and I am saying that something similar is taking place between people in organisations, as they communicate together. I am arguing that

this is what organisational improvisation is. However, I am also moving our understanding of organisational improvisation away from the heavily relied upon metaphors of jazz and improvisational theatre by arguing that improvisational interaction in organisations involves more than putting on a ‘good’ performance and includes important ways to signify group membership and therefore identity.

Through my research I have come to see my change management practice as improvisational in the way I have just described and through this thesis have outlined fully my understanding of improvisation in organisations. Beginning in project one, I have recounted some of my experiences of improvising within the confines of the management consulting techniques I was required to use. In project two I reflect on my improvisational attempts at innovating these techniques whereas in project three and four I describe in more detail the relational aspects of improvisation and how this affects and is affected by aspects of identity, particularly gender and sexuality. Having started with examining individual improvisational practice, as I have moved through the projects I have come to understand processes of improvisation within groups and how wider societal patterns, for example associated with gender and sexuality, are entangled with the ways we work together in organisations, much more than people usually acknowledge.

Whilst I am arguing for seeing improvisation in change management as not solely about working methods and practices and including aspects of identity, there are limitations to how many aspects of identity I can inquire into at any one time. So while I am influenced by an intersectional methodology, my focus is on gender and sexuality but not on other social identities. Intersectionality is a way of understanding, researching and discussing the complexity of identity. It specifically draws attention to the inability to separate characteristics of identity that coexist, particularly but not limited to the relationships between race, gender and class in debates about social inequality (Collins and Bilge, 2016: 1-30). Whether or not the different aspects of identity, often studied separately, have a collective impact (in other words the additive effect of not only being a man but a white middle-class man) on people’s lives or not within intersectional debates is contested (Yuval-Davis, 2016: 194-195). Nevertheless, intersectionality might demand taking a perspective on my organisational experience that I am not just a woman but a white,

middle-class woman, which I have not done, however I have examined aspects of gender and its relation to sexuality and therefore taken account of more than one aspect of identity. This is because the focus of my research has emerged through examining my experience of being at work. While studying processes of improvisation I have found myself reflecting on those aspects of identity more than any other and therefore this is reflected in my research.

The structure of this thesis may be unconventional, but it is deliberate. The chapters presenting projects one through to four are presented here in their original final form. By this I mean that from this point, I have presented the research as I undertook it, sequentially, starting with project one followed by project two and so on. I have conducted the research using a reflexive, experience-based narrative method. I have described my method fully in the synopsis later in this thesis, but so that it is clear on what basis I wrote these projects, it is worth saying this means I have narrated my experience of working with organisations in order to be reflexive and gain a deeper understanding of my practice and processes of organisational improvisation. Each project went through a number of iterations, redrafts and reinterpretations with input from others, particularly students and supervisors before reaching their final versions. However, I have not, when presenting the projects here, altered them in anyway from the completed version written at the time they were finished. Rather, within the synopsis I have in effect reused each of my projects as ‘data’ for further analysis and interpretation, presenting how I have now come to see and understand them differently and draw my final conclusions from them. Andrews (2013: 212-214) draws attention to the problems with using narratives, describing how interpretations can change with time, as we age or as they are read in different times or places. Rather than trying to ignore this phenomenon, or necessarily seeing this as a methodological problem, in presenting my research in this way, I have embraced this quality of using a narrative research method in order to deepen my understanding of improvisation in organisations and reach conclusions that would not have been possible and would also not make sense to the reader without the projects being presented in their original form. Indeed, it is also a requirement of the DMan programme to present the projects in their original form in the final thesis and then reinterpret them again in the synopsis, clearly demonstrating the movement of

thought leading to original contributions to knowledge and practice that the research has enabled.

Therefore, the next chapter is project one in which I describe how I had come to think about my work up to and including the start of my research. I describe the management consultancy techniques I was using at that time and make very few references to my practice as improvisational. This is because at that time I had not fully appreciated the role of improvisation in my practice although I had become highly critical of using prescribed consultancy techniques. Project one is followed by project two where I describe and discuss my attempts to innovate some of the consulting techniques and how this affects my relations with other people in the consultancy. In project three, recognising the role improvisation is playing in my practice I discuss the difference between improvisation and innovation, examining how novelty arises. In this project I include discussions of novelty arising through gender performativity (Butler, 1988), although I do not examine this at length, as it is not the focus of the project. However, having presented a long narrative in project three, rather than beginning project four by immediately presenting another narrative to examine, I take some time at the beginning of project four to continue to examine gender as an aspect of identity that is improvised, before bringing in other narratives of my experience to discuss and examine the issue further. In the final chapter of my thesis, the synopsis, I have presented my key arguments supported by reinterpreted material from my four projects, described in detail the method of research I have used and outlined my thoughts about the ethical considerations of my research.

## **Project one: How are the organisational changes I am involved in happening?**

### **Formation of my habitus**

Bourdieu (1977) uses the term habitus to mean the embodiment of cultural influences and life experiences that form and inform how thoughts and actions are structured and organised within people or as he refers to them below, agents.

If agents are possessed by their habitus more than they possess it, this is because it acts within them as the organizing principle of their actions, and because this *modus operandi* informing all thought and action (including thought of action) reveals itself only in the *opus operatum*.

(ibid: 18)

In order to examine reflexively the role I play in organisations and how I have come to find myself doing whatever it is I am doing with others during my time at work, it is first necessary to look at the influences and experiences that have formed the habitus that arranges and orchestrates my thoughts and actions.

I grew up during the time environmental issues transitioned from being on the fringe to headline news. Following the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, the lead in petrol debate, the death of North Sea Seals in 1988 and growing science about global warming, the effects of acid rain and the hole in the ozone layer, environmental issues had become headline news in the UK. In Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech to the Royal Society in September 1988 she talked about the unknown effects of environmental changes that had been observed and stated that there was a need to identify areas for research so that action would be founded on good science that has established cause and effect (Thatcher, 1988). The public also reacted to the increase in information that was available to them and in the 1989 European Elections 14.5% of votes were for the Green Party placing them third after the Labour Party and the Conservative Party respectively.

This rise in media attention, which was constructing a powerful narrative that human beings should start to think about the impact their actions have on planet Earth,

appealed strongly to me because it was echoed in the stories that were told within my own family. I am a descendant of family members on all sides with nonconformist beliefs, the strongest influence on me came from my mother's family's Quaker beliefs of equality for women, vegetarianism, environmentalism and peace. My father ran his own architectural practice alongside being a senior lecturer in Urban Design and therefore would often talk about considerations of the built environment and its effect on people and vice versa. Both my parents encouraged my interest in the environment, for example taking me to meet David Bellamy in 1988, when I was nine, at the Glasgow Garden Festival to allow me to take part in a pond survey with him.

At my all girls school, year on year, I took on roles such as recycling monitor, encouraging everyone to sort out their waste and take care for the environment. At weekends I wore T-shirts with Greenpeace slogans, e.g. Stop Acid Rain plastered over the front. I was a member of Wildlife WATCH, the young persons' branch of the Wildlife Trusts. My parents again supported me when I wanted to take part in national data collection projects that WATCH instigated, for example studying the ecology of British streams through undertaking kick surveys and compiling and returning the data so that a national picture of stream pollution levels could be brought together.

This focus of my spare time on environmental issues and campaigns, together with my aptitude for Chemistry and Biology, inevitably resulted in the careers advisor encouraging me to apply for a science degree, with some research and consideration about what was available it was a clear and obvious choice for me to study Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia.

Whilst at University, alongside studying the pure science of, for example, the chemistry of the atmosphere and oceans, I studied Environmental Economics and Environmental Politics. These elements of my course were concerned with the inability of the United Kingdom's established economic and political mechanisms to comprehend and adapt in order to address environmental issues, where the science was often very uncertain and unknown. I learnt about, how or whether they could adjust or adapt these sufficiently in order to take potential environmental



consequences of our current actions into account during policy formation. Alongside the question of the adaptability of the current political mechanisms, was how or if different nations could work together or make commitments through International Environmental Regimes to, for example, reduce the emissions of gases, thought to contribute to global warming. A cornerstone of the thinking was that because of the uncertain science, which could not demonstrate or replicate in a laboratory the observed environmental phenomenon within any reasonable range in order to establish cause and effect in the traditional scientific way, this would enable politicians worldwide to avoid taking action or making any changes. As a way to try to prevent this, lobby groups and pressure groups started to galvanise around a theme about the necessity to act, but with precaution. Because we now knew we were causing damage to the natural environment by our human actions, we could not continue to do nothing, but at the same time we could not say with certainty what should be done. This theme became known as the Precautionary Principle which was taken up slightly differently in different policy documents, but essentially all were similar to what was in The Third Ministerial Declaration on the North Sea signed by various North Sea states in 1990.

[They] will continue to apply the precautionary principle, that is to take action to avoid potentially damaging impacts of substances that are persistent, toxic and liable to bioaccumulate even where there is no scientific evidence to prove a causal link between emissions and effects.

(Third International Conference, 1990)

My studies were therefore typified by two main themes: the first was thinking through the implications, resistance and challenge to the established methods of scientific policy making, adoption and implementation that the precautionary principle raised, which were mainly associated with the challenge of gaining some acceptance of uncertainty, in both the future and the current scientific explanations; the second was how nation states would or could be persuaded to adopt the principle and therefore take action to reduce or remove environmental degradation, which involved the study of social movements, how people formed into pressure groups and subsequently the tactics they used.

The idea that humans could work together to try to help others see a different point of view, that things could be changed but with unknown consequences and results, had been reinforced for me through my environmental education in my own experience as recycling monitor and as a member of a pressure group where I had actively taken part in campaigns that I hoped would make a difference and change other people's worldviews. This habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and the way it has structured my thoughts and actions, can be seen throughout my career as the way I have thought about and undertaken my work with others.

### **Helping others to see things differently**

I was working for the UK Civil Service during an epidemic that affected livestock. During the disease outbreak, which lasted for about six months, despite working in a very junior role, I helped to change many of the written processes and procedures used during such disease outbreaks. Working at the office that became an administrative centre for dealing with the disease, I was involved from the initial notification. At that time there was huge uncertainty about what would happen, how many animals were infected, how the disease was spreading and what needed to be done. There had not been a serious epidemic effecting livestock for some considerable time, so there was significant anxiety about what was facing us all. Initially I helped set up and establish the administration centre, based on the current written processes and procedures (last revised following the previous outbreak in the 1960's), helping staff who had joined us from all over the county to settle in, not only to the work that needed to be done, but also to new surroundings they would call home. Most of the work of this group was associated with opening files so that records could be appropriately stored. Every farm visited within a defined radius of every infected premise needed a file, whether there were livestock there or not. Often therefore files were being opened and closed, a lengthy process resulting in the sole comment: no animals found. In many people's view this was a good example of wasted effort. Against the backdrop of many people working miles away from home, twenty-one days continuously with two days off, with working hours of 08:00 till 20:00, there were many conversations about this specific process and more generally the antiquated working practices we felt compelled to follow.

After about three weeks, I moved into the Geographical Information Systems (GIS) team. GIS is a computerised mapping system that can both display and query information geographically. I had been on the training only a month before the outbreak started, but this had built on knowledge I gained at University when undertaking projects about land use and renewable energy, so together with Jack (who was lead for GIS nationally) we had considerable expertise about what the GIS could do. Over the following weeks we used the technology to support an evolution of the current work processes and procedures and therefore the development of new ones, as they became accepted ways of working and adopted formally by those responsible for the outbreak.

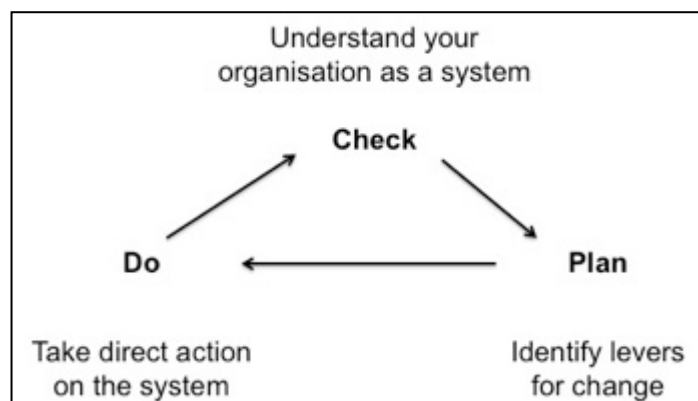
Initially we reduced the time it took for clinical staff to find and visit premises by providing detailed maps of their locations. We followed this by helping staff improve the schedule of visits they were allocated by providing maps with all their day's visits on them, so they could arrange a sensible route reducing the travel time between visits. Finally after acceptance and agreement from the most senior managers responsible, we were able to generate the schedules so that many more visits could be undertaken in a day, as we could use the technology to produce geographically based schedules, not ones based mainly on alphabetical lists.

Having had this experience I latched onto information technology (IT) systems and their introduction or improved utilisation as a way to help organisational change occur. Finding myself needing to provide plans and projections for how things would happen in the changes I was now leading for the organisation and struggling with how to do these, I went to the local Higher Education College in the evenings to study for my Diploma in Management studies. However, despite implementing all the project management techniques (Field and Keller, 1998; Thomsett, 2002) I learnt, thinking about how my IT change projects delivered the strategic objectives of the organisation (Johnson and Scholes, 2002) and setting the people working for me much clearer objectives and targets (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2002), the changes still did not happen as planned and expected. Preoccupied with finding the right model to explain what was really going on, the ideas of Seddon (2003) became very appealing. "There is a better way to approach the use of IT. It goes like this: Understand, improve, ask if IT can further improve." (ibid: 181). Suddenly I could

see that this was where I had been going wrong, I was not understanding and improving first before implementing the technology. But I did not know how these first steps worked, so I took the time to learn.

Since 2004 I have worked with a particular version of systems thinking created by Seddon (Seddon, 2003; 2008; Middleton, 2010). Initially I worked within organisations in the public sector, however in autumn 2010, I joined Roundphase Consulting and I now own my own business, where I get all of my work as a consultant through a licenced agreement with Roundphase working with organisations that want to use the Roundphase change methodology. Because this method is central to my practice as a consultant, which is the focus of my research, I will take this opportunity to examine this method in detail below. In the approach Roundphase use there is a three step process based on systems thinking (see figure 1).

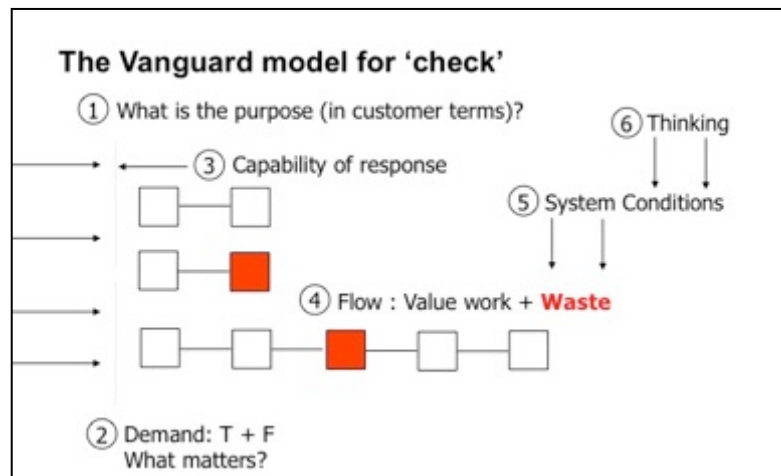
**Figure 1 – Performance improvement through ‘check-plan-do’**  
(Seddon, 2003: 113)



“Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things....” (Senge, 1990: 68) therefore the first phase of work within the client is to use the Model for Check (see figure 2) which helps people to see wholes and understand their organisation, or their part of the organisation that needs changing, as a system.

**Figure 2 – The model for ‘check’**

(Seddon, 2008: 79)



Initially it is likely that this activity will take place at a very high level with just one or maybe two managers who are looking for consultancy help. This informs the negotiation that needs to take place with respect to whether the Roundphase techniques can help solve the problem, what costs and resources are involved and whether a constructive relationship can be built between the manager and the consultant. If the engagement goes ahead after this preliminary work, a start date and team composition are agreed in preparation to use the Model for Check (figure 2) with the team, to “[get] knowledge of the ‘what and why’ of current performance as a system” (ibid: 78).

The team are usually staffed from the service area concerned, often taken from different layers of the current organisational hierarchy and who have different responsibilities. For example a team chosen to undertake work to improve the administration of Welfare Benefits within a Local Authority, would normally comprise the following discrete roles; a customer services officer, an administrator, a benefits advisor, a benefits assessor, a team leader and a more senior manager. My role as the consultant is to take them through steps one to six on the Model for Check (figure 2), which would typically involve activities like listening to telephone calls, re-examining casework, recalculating the time taken to process work and the different ways work tasks are being done. Essentially my role is to take the team through a data collection exercise that helps them to understand how, and how well,

the team is performing at the moment and what level of performance customers are experiencing.

The two most important steps in the model are “6. Thinking” which I shall return to later and “1. What is the purpose (in customer terms)?”

Without a defined purpose you cannot determine whether your system is functioning well, poorly, or not at all. Without a clear purpose you won't know how to improve or redesign the system.

(Scholtes, 1998: 22)

Through various negotiations and conversations about the information that has been collected, the team normally do arrive at a purpose for the system. This is an apprehensive time for the consultant, because as Scholtes (1998) and Seddon (2003) recognise, the purpose becomes the anchor point from which the changes are redesigned. For the Roundphase methods to work, it is vital that the team do decide on a purpose that enables this to happen, although they have little understanding of what that would look like. In order to achieve this, sometimes the consultant must take the lead, meaning the process of purpose formation can often feel very forced and not negotiated or owned by the team.

Turning now to step 6 on the model for Check (figure 2), thinking, Seddon (2003: 114) states that this Check phase is essentially a technique to help the team and managers reframe the problem. A reframing, which at this step becomes dependent on the idea that only by changing thinking can a new system be designed and implemented. Therefore when the time comes to consider this ‘thinking’ element of the model, the question becomes, are the management assumptions, or thinking, behind the current ways of working, command and control, reductionist approaches or based in systems thinking?

**Figure 3 – Command and control thinking versus systems thinking**

(Middleton, 2010: xi)

<b>Command and Control Thinking</b>		<b>Systems Thinking</b>
Top-down	Perspective	Outside-in
Functional specialisation	Design	Demand, value and flow
Separated from work	Decision-making	Integrated with work
Budget, targets, standards, activity and productivity	Measurement	Designed against Purpose, demonstrate variation
Extrinsic	Motivation	Intrinsic
Manage budgets and the people	Management Ethic	Act on the system
Contractual	Attitude to customers	What matters...?
Contractual	Attitude to suppliers	Partnering and cooperation
Change by project/initiative	Approach to change	Adaptive, integral

The team use the table, at Figure 3, to assess their organisation, based on all the information that has been collected about what is happening and why. They determine which side, Command and Control or Systems Thinking, best describes how managers make decisions, and take action in the organisation. Invariably they come to the conclusion that currently the organisation is based on the left-hand side, command and control thinking and therefore if managers can change their thinking to the right hand side, systems thinking, and redesign the system to achieve its new purpose, significant improvements must be delivered. It is not just Seddon (2003) and Middleton's (2010) book that portray managers as the source of the current performance issues, Deming (1994) also emphasises this point "The present style of management is the biggest producer of waste, causing huge losses whose magnitudes cannot be evaluated, cannot not be measured" (ibid: 22).

Argyris would describe the Check process slightly differently, as a process to facilitate organisational learning, which he states “is a process of detecting and correcting error” (1977: 116). He then makes the distinction between what he calls single loop learning and double loop learning.

When the plant managers and marketing people were detecting and attempting to correct error in order to manufacture Product X, that was single loop learning.

When they began to confront the question whether Product X should be manufactured, that was double loop learning, because they were now questioning underlying organization policies and objectives.

(ibid)

He is still putting the responsibility with managers, although the responsibility is to question the underlying assumptions that are governing the way action is being taken. Essentially though, this is the same as questioning whether the organisation is situated on the left or right hand side of Figure 3.

The managers I am working with as a consultant are then faced with a choice. They can change the management assumptions, the way they and the rest of the managers think, to those based on systems thinking, the left hand side of Figure 3, and armed with this knowledge, redesign the system to achieve the new purpose. Or they can decide that there is not sufficient evidence that this will lead to improvements and stop the engagement with me. This choice, described as part of the Roundphase method as free and informed choice, taken from the work of Argyris (1970: 18) is made into an explicit decision through the planned, formal review of progress to date, at a meeting between the team, their managers and any other important decision makers.

Argyris says there are three primary tasks of an interventionist (or consultant), 1) valid and useful information, 2) free choice and 3) internal commitment (1970: 17-20). At this point in an engagement with the client, the end of Check meeting is thought of as the second step, free choice. “Free choice makes it possible for the clients to remain responsible for their destiny. Through free choice the clients can maintain the autonomy of their system” (ibid: 19). However, I question if there is



truly a free choice at this point. At the end of the Check stage the team are usually very dissatisfied with their current working methods and practices, they are often dissatisfied with their manager, or their manager's manager and are also often anxious, apprehensive and fearful about the prospects for any of these things to change. A state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) has been created with the team, where dissatisfaction now exists with what the team members' previous normal working practices were, which are still going on in the rest of the department. "If a person holds cognitions A and B such that A follows from the opposite of B, then A and B are dissonant" (Cooper, 2007: 6). At the start of the process, members of the team often have doubts about some aspects of their work and are keen to improve them. However, the apparent need to make such a dramatic shift to a new purpose, to a new way of thinking, would mean totally abandoning the status quo.

Aside from the team's feelings, there are often other organisational commitments that have been made, promises to superiors or colleagues or the rest of the department about what will be delivered. At this stage, the knowledge gained is limited to what is wrong with the current ways of working, not how to transform it. It is therefore predictable that the client almost always chooses to take the next step, Plan.

### **Helping others to do things differently**

In the next stage in the Roundphase approach, Plan (see figure 1), the team, led by their manager and myself as the consultant, design a new system and then experiment with ways of optimising that system. Armed with a new purpose, a way of thinking that is congruent with systems thinking (see Figure 3) and some operating principles adapted from learning about the Toyota Production System (Ohno, 1998), the team design on paper how they will all work together to take the next piece of live work and process it in the new way, operate the new system. By 'live' work I mean taking either the next new case that comes in or the next telephone call or the next customer to visit face to face and intercept this work, prevent it going through the old system and use it to test the new system.

Returning to the example of a system for Welfare Benefits administration, the team will have decided on a new purpose, something like, “to pay the right people the right money as quickly as possible” (Seddon, 2008: 79). To assist effective action in line with the new purpose, appropriate operating principles are also adopted, an example of which can be found in Middleton (2010: 77-78); Do what matters to the customer, Get it right at first point of contact, Only do the value work, Minimise hand-offs, Minimise waste, Do clean work in end-to-end flows and Design against demand. Then the final element is to decide what performance measures are required to guide action. How will the operation of the new system be monitored? Deciding and adopting these measures is important because it enables the detection and elimination of error, and therefore according to Argyris (1977) organisational learning, which is fundamental to this phase of the change. New performance measures must be designed versus purpose (Seddon, 2008: 82), to adequately measure the effectiveness of the performance of the system and therefore if the new purpose is being achieved. In this particular system the measure adopted is most likely to be the time taken to process a claim for welfare benefits, from the first point the customer contacts the Local Authority until the customer has received payment or notification of non-entitlement (ibid: 28-29).

Without fail, the first few cases put through the new system do not work well, but as the team work together on more cases or customer demands, constructing together new ways of working, through trial and error, looking at and reflecting on what works better and what helps them to deliver better services for customers, using the performance measures and each other as guides, different working practices and methods emerge.

A Roundphase consultant’s role during this phase takes different forms depending on the particular situation, but it is essentially to drive out fear and support the team to problem solve and gain clarity of thought. Specifically this could be about building confidence that the team can change the way things are done and encouraging them to have a go and do something differently, improvise. Or, it could take the form of resolving disputes between team members about what will work, or perhaps of finding ways of keeping the managers engaged and supporting their staff to make the changes. Egan (2002) would describe this as a problem-management and

opportunity-development approach to helping where the focus of the helper or consultant is to help clients manage their problems more effectively by developing unused resources and missed opportunities more fully (ibid: 7). Deming (2000: 59-62) talks about the need to drive out fear, to make people feel secure “not afraid to express ideas, not afraid to ask questions.” Whereas Argyris would say that

...the more individuals in systems are able to behave in an open and experimenting manner, the more they are able to express their feelings related to the substantive issues, the more they are able to help others do the same, and the higher the probability is that the system in which they work will manifest competent problem solving, decision making, and implementation of behaviour.

(1970: 40)

All of these interpretations reflect what at this stage I am trying to do with the team. No matter what the precise circumstances, for me this phase it is about helping others to clarify what is going on, what solutions they might take forward, and how they can confidently try to achieve them which I have come to see as supporting the team to improvise.

Improvisation may also serve as input to learning, and learning may be thought of as embedded in improvisation. Improvisation can provide input to and serve as a first step in trial-and-error learning.

(Vendelø, 2009: 451)

With this help, eventually, new and innovative ways of doing the work, to achieve the new purpose, arise, are tested and settle down. There are less unexpected or new problems to solve or resolve and the team have built their confidence, skills and knowledge so they can all deal with the majority of customer cases or calls. They can each, individually, work in the new way, rather than at the start of the Plan process where the whole team work together on one case. What the team members are actually doing now is very different to what they were doing previously and some roles will have changed considerably or become redundant. At this stage a significant volume of work is being done in the new way, being put through the new system. Concurrently, the performance measures typically show vast improvements,

“after system redesign all benefits are processed in an average of five to six days” (Seddon, 2008: 41) compared with an average of nearly fifty two days before the change process (Figure 3.5: What caused this system’s performance to change in Seddon (ibid: 38)). Therefore a new way of doing things has been arrived at, which has been co-created by the team and their managers with the help of the consultant and is therefore agreed.

Around this settled point, the client is then confronted with another free choice (Argyris, 1970: 19), that is, whether to adopt the new way of working across the whole department in question or to ask the team to abandon what they have been doing and revert to their old ways of working and re-join their old teams. At this point the team and their managers often take time to demonstrate the new system to other people, from, for example audit or finance departments and possibly very senior managers, whose credibility and acceptance of the changes are needed to implement the new approach. Depending on the improvements that have been delivered and the appetite to make the changes that would be necessary to enable all staff to work in the new way, the client decides whether to go into the final phase, Do (see figure 1), or to stop the engagement with the consultant and ask the team to return to their previous ways of working.

The Do phase of the Check, Plan, Do cycle is concerned with implementing the new way of working across everyone in the service area or departments that are affected by the design of the new system. The team who have been working with me thus far may represent 80% of the staff affected by the new design or 5% and therefore plans must be made for them to support their colleagues to adopt the new working methods, and therefore embed the changes. At this point there are often retraining, IT changes, restructuring, sometimes redundancy elements of the plan that need to be managed and therefore a consultant’s support is focused mainly on coaching the managers through these elements from previous experience. However, the team often still need some support and guidance with regard to training or retraining their colleagues. Often teams experience and exhibit a kind of euphoric almost evangelical behaviour and this impedes their ability to successfully influence and help their contemporaries to adopt the new working methods as it can be experienced by the other party as quite confrontational. As a consultant, I therefore often find

myself providing support to the team to help them avoid this as much as possible, teaching them cycles of courage not cycles of contempt techniques (Maravelas, 2005: 148) and reminding them of the journey they have been on.

It is not unusual that consultancy support is vastly reduced in this phase, and that help is provided in shorter sessions, perhaps only once every two weeks or once a month until the client is confident and able to manage without further assistance from me. My work with the client over the length of the engagement would be characterised by intensive periods of working together, initially this would be almost full time during the Check phase, steadily reducing through the Plan and Do phase until the end of the agreement or the change is embedded across the service area. This is designed as Argyris (1970: 17) says to help the client change, eventually, without help from the interventionist who remains an objective observer or outsider.

### **Helping myself to see things differently**

What I have been describing above, a particular consulting method (Seddon, 2003; 2008; Middleton, 2010) I was using, does to some extent solve the problem I had been struggling with in my IT driven change projects, because the design of IT to support and reinforce the new system happens at the Do phase, there was always good take up. This is probably a twofold effect. Firstly, the team are encouraged to revert to paper or simple spread-sheets during the Plan phase, so some IT support is a welcome labour saving device and secondly, due to the attention paid to the design of the new system, the requirements that IT need to fulfil are known precisely. It is as Seddon (2003: 181) states, understand (Check) and Improve (Plan) first before implementing IT (Do) and the IT implementation will work. However, although the method seemed to help with implementing IT changes, not all projects worked well. It was often difficult to get agreement at the start for resources to be freed up, teams often became very disillusioned and felt let down if their managers could not support the construction of the ideal situations they developed during the redesign and sometimes the changes were too different and organisationally unpalatable and therefore abandoned. I started to have some doubts about the universal applicability of the method and questioned, what assumptions about organisational change and

how it happens was I taking on or still taking for granted having adopted this Roundphase method?

In 2007 I went to a seminar about organisational development where Ralph Stacey gave a lecture, in which he said something like,

When organisational practitioners and researchers talk and write about an ‘*organisation*’, no matter what perspective they take, they are all basically talking about groupings of people engaged in some kind of joint activity that has some purpose – which could be to search for some purpose.

(Stacey, 2011: 289)

It is difficult to say exactly how this insight felt important at the time, but I now see that it was calling me back to ideas about how change happened in my earliest experiences and from my learning about social movements at University. Change *was* about people and how they did whatever they did, which would produce inherently *unpredictable* results. Change was not about designing perfect systems that would then predictably govern people’s behaviour. It was not, ‘the system not the people’, there was no system, only people. I started to reevaluate my thoughts about “major causes of differences in performance are beyond the attributes of individuals” (Seddon, 2003: 125), and “Systems are the engines that run situations that create behavioural contexts that influence the human action of those under their control” (Zimbardo, 2007: 179) and consider what Stacey was talking about, “complex responsive processes of relating” (2011: 293) as a different way of understanding what is going on in organisations:

in thinking about organizations, if we move from assuming underlying certainty to assuming underlying uncertainty, we begin to think in ways close to our ordinary, everyday experience. The sciences of uncertainty also demonstrate that local interaction produces coherent emergent patterns across populations. Furthermore, it is when the agents [people] engaged in this local interaction differ from each other that the evolution of patterns of interaction locally and across populations becomes possible. All of these insights point to an alternative way of thinking about organizations.

(Stacey, 2012: 21)

Returning to the question of what assumptions about change and the way change happens in organisations did I unquestioningly take on board by adopting Seddon's methods for change, I believe there are four main points to draw attention to about the underlying assumptions in systems thinking which are behind Seddon's thinking, and the other authors he draws on.

Firstly, that the organisation is a system (Seddon, 2003: 112). It has boundaries between different departments and sections and between one organisation and another (Scholtes, 1998: 22). It is therefore not only permissible but possible to understand one part of the organisation as a system, change it completely and expect the sub and supra systems to accept, adjust, almost welcome this improvement. It is the system not the people who need to change or can be changed, it is the system that governs the behaviour of the people within it (Deming, 1994: 168-171), who are therefore just parts of the system that have to be rearranged to optimise the system in order for the system to act back on the people and change them (Zimbardo, 2007: 195).

Secondly that it is the responsibility of managers and consultants to design the system and implement changes to it in a rational way (Senge, 1990: 341). These powerful people in the organisation can decide on the system's purpose, new performance measures, adopt operating principles for the people to work to, they have control, or methods to maintain control, over everything that happens in the system (Middleton, 2010: 80). If the system does not perform as intended or expected, it is the fault of the manager or consultant for not designing the correct system or making the necessary adjustments to maintain the system in order that the system's purpose and potential can be realised (Deming, 2000: 18).

Thirdly, you have to change your thinking in order to change the system. Managers must challenge their underlying assumptions about the organisation and how it works in order to create a new system (Seddon, 2008: 70). In order to understand the current assumptions the manager or consultant can become an independent, objective observer, who can take an outside-in view (Deming, 1994: 92), during which the

impact of these assumptions becomes clear and this drives the necessity and knowledge to change (Seddon, 2003: 112-114).

Fourthly, changes are predictable, certain, knowable and can be planned. If you know the point of leverage you can change the system (Senge, 1990: 64). Learning is a process of detecting and correcting errors.

In critiquing this way of thinking about organisational change Stacey (2011) points out that all of these suppositions are based on a view if X then Y follows, and therefore that there is no allowance for novelty, unpredictability, spontaneity in organisational change which is a generalised view that does not take into consideration what actually happens in people's experience of organisational change (ibid: 49-53).

Not only was Stacey (2010: 10-11) drawing my attention to these assumptions and whether they were necessary to bring about organisational change, but I knew from one of my own earliest experiences of organisational change in the UK Civil Service that these descriptions and prescriptions were not how all organisational changes happened or needed to happen. Reflecting back on this experience, I will return again to the assumptions that underpin Seddon's understanding of organisational change and whether I recognise these in my experience of change during the epidemic. Looking specifically at the following assumptions; that the organisation is a system, that it is the responsibility of managers to design and change the system, changing management thinking is a prerequisite for change and that changes are predictable, I will examine whether these are necessary to bring about organisational change and are reflected in my experience and my understanding of what was happening.

When working with Jack and others to design and implement the changes, we never once talked or thought about what was going on in the epidemic as a system. We only thought about how we could influence others and who they were, to help them see the time saving ability that the GIS could bring, and at the same time, that bringing IT into the working practices was not a significant operational risk. Neither of us were managers or automatically held powerful positions of influence, in fact we



were at the lower end of the personnel hierarchy that was established to deal with the outbreak, and to those who did have control we were probably initially thought of as completely irrelevant, messing about with computers and maps while other people got on with the real work of clearing up the epidemic. We did eventually need management permission to accept the changes, but they were far too busy dealing with the press and Ministers to take the time to get involved and understand what was going on in detail. Besides, by the time a decision was needed it was only a decision about *when* the GIS team would get the schedule. Either make a change and give the schedule to the GIS team the night before so they could allocate the jobs geographically and everything could be printed off ready for the morning or continue as things had emerged and schedule work with alphabetical lists and have a long queue at the door of the GIS team in the morning as everyone waited patiently while we produced their maps before they left. The incorporation of GIS into working practices had already taken place and was universally accepted as an improvement, it was only a question of *when* we could start work with the schedule that needed to be decided.

I also do not believe anyone, especially those in a management position, questioned their underlying assumptions about the design and management of work. I think we (Jack, the clinical staff on the ground and I) worked together to use technology to benefit us all. I am not saying that we all acted altruistically with the sole intention to selflessly help others, Jack and I were intent to show our IT expertise through demonstrating we could make improvements to working practices. Whereas the clinical staff were intent on improving the schedule to save time and effort, to get the work done more quickly, reducing the likelihood of further spread of the disease thereby reducing the number of animals to be slaughtered and shortening the time they were away from their families. My experience here does not therefore lead me to believe that anyone underwent a fundamental shift in their whole management ideology or that this modification is a necessary prerequisite for change.

Lastly and perhaps for me most clearly, there was nothing that could be planned, certain or knowable in the long term. We were in an emergency outbreak situation, nobody knew what was going to happen hour by hour, how many new livestock premises would be infected, whether five or twenty-five more staff would be needed

next week to support the work. Yet, against this background, effective changes to organisational working practices were developed and adopted universally.

Therefore I do not believe the explanations and assumptions Seddon (2003; 2008), Deming (1994; 2000), Scholtes (1998), Senge (1990), Middleton (2010), Argyris (1970; 1977) and systems thinking in general makes about organisational change reflects a reality I have experienced. Referred to by Stacey (2010: 10) as the dominant discourses about management and organisational change, their writings are based on a way of understanding what is going on in organisations that from my own experiences and knowledge of Stacey (2010; 2011; 2012), Elias and Scotson (1994) and Mowles (2011) are idealised prescriptions and interpretations. However, in the work I am currently doing as a consultant with Roundphase, organisational changes are occurring, some of great benefit to the customers and staff of the organisations I am working with. I would like to research and understand therefore what is actually going on, what am I doing in these processes of change and how are people changing what they are doing.

### **The emerging themes in this project**

For me, there are themes emerging from this project of the role in organisational change of disillusionment, improvisation, forming or reforming groups and building alliances between people. These are unified by a strong theme emerging in my thought and reflection about my work, of loyalty and the role loyalty plays in processes of organising. I think this is important to me because I have often found myself forming strong productive relationships with people in order to try to make a shift or change in the organisations I work in or with. I am reflecting on the necessity to have trust and loyalty with the people you are working with before changes or improvisations to the status quo can be discussed or attempted together.

I have discussed at length in this project how I work as a consultant with clients, I would like in this final section of project one, to briefly describe how the consultancy firm organises itself. In Elias and Scotson's (1994) work, the *Established and the Outsiders*, about a village called Winston Parva, they examine two groups that are essentially homogeneous except for the fact that the established group has been in

the village longer than the outsider group. Their work forms conclusions about the interdependent dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion that the established group use to maintain its status in the face of the newcomers who try to improve their status and position. Built on close integration and cohesion, the established group, maintain their power over the outsider group through techniques of gossip, which creates and maintains group ideologies and charisma that at the same time as including some, excluded and maintained the exclusion of others, the outsider group (ibid: 158).

I can see this established / outsider dynamic operating within Roundphase Consulting. There is a small elite, who, with the managing director formed and shaped the company and its methods, who therefore maintain positions of power in the company and form what I see as Roundphase's established group. All the other consultants, although many more in number, form the outsider group, even if you have worked with the company for twelve years, you are treated like a newcomer with a lot to learn. As part of the outsider group, my experience of decisions about who gets work, what client engagements they get and how this happens are also to do with loyalty. What I am saying here is, that between all the people in the outsider group, who are as Elias and Scotson (1994) describe, disparate, newcomers who hardly know each other and often internalise the negative image of themselves held by the established group, strong relationships form, mainly based on the degree of loyalty you demonstrate to each other. My identity within the outsider group is assured provided I enter into the gossip and continuing characterisation of the established group. This gossip usually pertains to denigrating the established group in a number of ways; how unfair it is that they get the best, most lucrative jobs and how they get them; that they think there is no money in public sector work and want to divest from that sector, when it is an important strand of Roundphase's work; that they think they know how to do everything and make it a success and yet they have a poor record of long term engagements with clients because they are extremely uncompromising. But between the individuals in the large outsider group what you do, how you do it and who you do it with, are all choices of demonstrating loyalty towards one person or their clique versus another to whom you may at the same time be demonstrating disloyalty. Small differences in the implementation of steps in the model for check, or specific ways to describe certain commonly experienced

phenomena, will demonstrate to others whose 'team' you are on and what you think is 'right'. Strong allegiances build up, denoted by the dynamic I expect that if I do something for others they will do something for me or I expect that if I do something for you, you will do something for me. It may also be predicated on not doing something that draws attention to the client or the job, if others working with you feel things are not going well, keeping silent about that to others in the group is also a highly valued trait, although for others talking about mistakes in order to learn is paramount. The choices made in these personal conflicts of loyalty, also play an important part in the ongoing shifts in power relations, and your identity within the outsider group, because everyone can interpret your decisions "we can make judgements about how admirable a certain loyalty is-or isn't-even in cases in which we are not personally involved" (Jollimore, 2013: xiii).

If you are judged to have been continuously disloyal or step out of line with a number of people in the outsider group, this risks exclusion from the outsider group altogether. However, in order to be excluded from getting work through Roundphase altogether and have your licence to practice Roundphase method revoked, the established group also need to agree you should be excluded. This effects the way we work with clients, as demonstrations of loyalty are often manifest in the way concepts developed by those in the established group are explained or incorporated into the work with clients. Whether these things are appropriate for the particular client situation or not, in order to remain included or to justify to the established group you do things in the 'right' way, you find yourself doing these things as gestures to others.

I can also see how people's loyalties influence their decisions within the client side of the interventions I am involved in as a consultant. The team have personal conflicts of loyalty to each other in the new team versus their previous colleagues. The managers and decision makers also have to make choices between following my advice or what the new team need or perhaps their management team colleagues who do not believe the changes are necessary. How this impacts both the client's behaviour and decisions and my own decisions and ability to work with the client, is a theme I would like to take forward further in my research. I am particularly interested in how rational models, grids, methods and accepted management

techniques, like the Roundphase method, promulgated by the dominant discourses on management and organisational change are taken up by managers and consultants to justify their decisions, for the good of the organisation as the right thing to do. The thoughts and explanations given are something like ‘This model we are following proves that in this system we no longer need people with these skills, so we have to make them redundant’. I would like to research if these accounts, justified by the grids, models and methods of the dominant discourse are being used to absolve feelings and emotions associated with placing your loyalty with one person and/or their group over another to prevent personal exclusion, which could include placing your loyalty with *the organisation*. If so, whether these highly abstract and rational explanations are leading to the dehumanisation of organisations in the same way as Jollimore talks about loyalty to nation states and its relation to war.

One’s reaction to *one’s own* memberships, and one’s own loyalty to the “right” side, is taken to mean something quite different: these facts about oneself are interpreted both as providing a moral justification for one’s violent behaviour (since it is done in the name of all that is good and holy) and, where such behaviour might be somewhat morally questionable, as rendering one *less* responsible for those actions.

(Jollimore, 2013: 71)

In project two, I would like to research a specific situation where I find myself working with a client supporting them to improvise and innovate in an attempt to try to change the organisation that causes me to experience a conflict of loyalties. I want to look specifically at a situation where I feel the inconsistency between the actions my colleagues (from the outsider group) who I am working with want to do, what I feel the managing director (a member of the established group) wants consultants to do and what the client wants us to do (my loyalty towards my customer, who pays me) which is a situation I often find myself in. I will look at how these complex relationships support or detract from my ability to improvise with the client to do what they want and how my actions affect and are affected by thoughts of status within the power hierarchy of the outsider group.

**Project two: Power, innovation and control: experiencing the tension between organisational change and social control during processes of management consulting**

**Introduction**

In project one, drawing on insights from Elias and Scotson (1994) I briefly described the structure of Roundphase Consulting as being divided into two groups, a small, established group with the managing director at the helm and a large outsider group who were disparate and disconnected from each other. I perceived that the way work and projects were allocated seemed to have more to do with loyalty and your ability to demonstrate your loyalty to certain people and their way of thinking about what should happen, rather than your competency, experience and what is best for the client. In this project I want to examine much more closely how being part of the outsider group effects my thoughts and actions, the power dynamics within the group, and the effect power has on the ability to innovate or improvise. This narrative is about the way I try to bring my previous experience and improvisational practice together to innovate Roundphase techniques with my client. Having, at last, been granted, as I see it, some freedom as client lead, I want to use this opportunity to demonstrate my expertise using Roundphase techniques but I encounter resistance to my suggestions initially from my colleagues and latterly also my client despite the managing director's desire to support innovatory practice.

**Narrative: New business from an old client**

Roundphase Consulting had worked with the Housing department in City Council in 2006, but neither my colleague Olivia nor I were involved at that time. This previous engagement is seen as a very successful one, with the council's Housing manager and department as a whole winning several international awards for the service improvements delivered as a result of the work that was undertaken together. Roundphase Consulting has often referred to this work, the amazing results that were achieved and published several case studies featuring the detail of what took place and the transformation delivered. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the work City Council and Roundphase Consulting did together has been held up as

being one of the most successful client interventions Roundphase Consulting have delivered and as a result, the consultant who led the work, James, has experienced much kudos within the company. This kudos has enabled him to take on the role in Roundphase of Housing lead and ring-fence all Housing work, choose who to work with at the exclusion of others and therefore control the economic benefits associated with all work from this sector. I had worked in the same client with James when I first joined Roundphase although we did not work together directly because he had been working with the Housing department and I had been working with the finance department. He was very forthright about how he thought things should be done, how Roundphase techniques should be implemented especially in Housing and often in conversation with us over dinner berated client leaders he was working with or contractors of the Council for not doing what he was telling them they should. He was often also very disparaging about consultants who did not do what he thought they should and talked about refusing to work with people who were so incompetent or disloyal to his approach. Despite the fact that I disagreed with his authoritarian attitude, I had always got on quite well with James and contacted him in the early stages of working in City Council to seek any help and advice he could give me. His only remark was that the whole thing was a waste of time as the leaders were useless and were not ever going to change.

### **Thoughts and discussions about a new approach**

This assignment with City Council was to assist them with their Troubled Families initiative and work across the whole of the Public Sector, so was quite different to what had been done before in Housing. The Troubled Families initiative is a Central Government programme designed to support Local Authorities to work differently with families, who meet certain criteria that determine the level of complexity of their needs and the cost of services provided to them, in order to reduce that cost. Working with clients on this initiative was a new area of work for Roundphase Consulting, in fact the only other client we had worked with on this topic was London Borough. The person who was leading this work in London Borough and who is Roundphase Consulting's lead in Social Care systems, Olivia, was working with me.

Olivia and I spent two days at the civic offices in City Council undertaking the first two preparatory stages of Roundphase Consulting's technique, familiarisation and scoping. This part of the consulting process is for Roundphase consultants to gain an understanding of what is happening in the client situation with their customers and their current work processes so that the review team can be appropriately constructed. Usually most of the time is spent looking through files and computer systems and meeting a limited number of people. However, at my request, and much to Olivia's reluctance, we arranged two drop-in sessions where anyone could come and meet us and talk to us about the review, ask questions or find out more about Roundphase techniques. Both of these were well attended especially by senior managers from the client's partner organisations, who we would normally not have had the chance to meet with informally at this early stage. By the end of the two days we had met many managers and teams within the client and their partner organisations who we would be working with, talked through conceptually what we would be doing, agreed who was coming forward to be on the team to work directly with us and had an understanding of how the work happened currently.

As Roundphase Consulting's lead in Social Care systems, Olivia had picked up the initial contact for this piece of work from James. As the company has grown, in order to deal with client requests for work within Roundphase Consulting a structure has emerged where people who have the most expertise or have demonstrated the most significant improvements with their clients in an area, become the lead for that area. Due to the previous success in Housing in City Council, James became the lead for Housing and through a similar route, Olivia became the lead for Social Care. What this means is that all work associated with that topic goes initially to the lead for that area, either for them to undertake the work, or for them to oversee by passing it on to someone that they, as the expert, deem competent. This gives the leads considerable control over who they work with, how they do the work because of their recognised expertise, how much work they keep for themselves and, therefore, how much they earn. In this case Olivia had been clear from the beginning that due to other commitments she would not have the capacity to direct the job full-time. As I had worked with her in London Borough Troubled Families work earlier in the year, she suggested that I took the lead with her support. I was delighted about this. I saw this as an opportunity to lead a large piece of new work in a new area and



demonstrate my expertise and competence. Despite being an experienced Director when I joined the consultancy, I had not led a team of other consultants before; in all my other jobs since joining the firm, I had worked on my own or on occasion, for someone else. I hoped that this opportunity would lead to gaining autonomy and perhaps some control over the type and volume of work I was given. Until now, work assignments had been patchy and I was earning significantly less money than I had been promised when I signed my licence agreement which was becoming a bit of a problem for the viability of my business.

Everyone anticipated that Troubled Families would be a growing area of work and as it involved third sector organisations, Emily, Roundphase's lead for the third sector, had spoken to Olivia about also joining the team for a day a week to learn about the Troubled Families initiative and therefore potentially service or support this work in the future. Although I knew Olivia well and we had worked closely together over the previous year, the only time Olivia, Emily and I had worked in the same client engagement was for five weeks at the start of the previous year. We had probably spent, at most, three days together in the same place working with the previous client. Therefore actively working together on the client engagement in City Council was in effect the first time we had all worked together properly.

Over the next couple of days I talked with Olivia about what we had done at City Council and what we had found out. Reflecting on our experience I started to plan the next stage of the assignment, which would be the initial days with a dedicated team made up from staff from the client and their partners. Although it is not a mandated part of the Roundphase techniques, there are expectations of what the team induction will comprise of. It is expected that the lead consultant will take the new team through a standard set of one hundred and fifty PowerPoint slides, which normally takes the whole of the first day. In the past, when I have been working on my own I have significantly curtailed this, as I know others have. However, I have always done it in some way, sometimes in a shortened form or at other times where I have used less slides but replicated the information on a flip chart, but I have always followed the standard format and structure. I felt now that something different was needed for this new team in City Council. I wanted to get them to do more of the talking right from the start and try to create with them a different shared experience

from what I perceived to be the usual way review teams were inducted on the first day. I felt that sticking to the usual script would result in them only experiencing me standing at the front talking at them all day and not getting to know the people who they would be working with from across the Council and other Public Sector partners. It was also important to the client that time was given on this first day when the full team was present to agree how to manage the variable time commitments across the team members. So I devised a plan that would do something different. It would still allow me to talk about the Roundphase techniques, but most of the time was going to be taken up with each member of the team talking about their current work, where they worked, who for, what it was like to work there and what helped and hindered them to do what they were currently trying to do.

As I was leading this job, I did what I felt I was expected to do and I shared this plan with several colleagues including Olivia and Emily, who had a range of reactions from mild anxiety to total horror. I received responses including questioning why I would do that, reiterating that we always start day one with orientation in the same way and reaffirming that it would be a huge risk to do something so different. Olivia and Emily were particularly anxious about the fact that initially City Council had been James's client and if I followed this plan at the start, and the whole intervention did not work then he would not want to work with me, and maybe them, ever again. I would get a reputation for not being able to do the right things. They were directly questioning my competence and whether I should be leading the job. They pointed out that as I had not led a job before, perhaps I did not know what I should be doing and I sensed that they also talked to others about this, perhaps they were even trying to find out if someone else was available to take over the job. The message was clear, interventions always start that way for a reason, and I must do it that way, although the reason was not clear to me. I did not believe that it would ruin the whole intervention if I followed a different plan as I had become increasingly sceptical about whether the techniques were responsible for the change at all, as explained in project one. However, I was very upset by their reaction. I had only shared my thoughts with people who I thought knew me, knew how capable I was, who would be loyal to me and have faith in me to do a good job. I felt that my practice was being policed and therefore paralysed. I felt very disillusioned with the

colleagues I trusted and questioned why I had joined the consultancy in the first place. I had been innovating and adapting Roundphase techniques whilst a director of change with great effect, and I knew those deviations would most likely be seen by those within Roundphase Consulting as incorrect practice, but I had assumed that if I became part of the firm these would become recognised as customisations or improvements and I might be recognised for them.

### **Resignation, a response to resistance**

I worried that my colleagues would try to get me taken off the job, which I could not afford to lose. On the other hand I felt trapped and did not want to work within Roundphase Consulting if I could not change anything, if the techniques were so rigid and I just had to follow a prescription, I would have to leave. I needed to do something else. I wanted to use my intuition, instinct and insight while working with teams to see if together we could find new ways to do things in organisations and this is what I had always used the Roundphase techniques to do. I did not want to be a robot, just standing at the front saying the same things over and over and where relationships with colleagues seemed dependent on towing the line, fitting in and doing as you were told. I decided I must think about doing something else and started looking for jobs and other consulting opportunities.

I arranged a meeting at the offices with the managing director of Roundphase Consulting. It was quite clear in my mind that I was increasingly feeling trapped, constrained and stressed, working in the way I felt was expected of me. I was therefore meeting him to explain this before telling him I was leaving. I thought about what might happen in the meeting with the managing director and I wrote in my notebook a draft of approximately two hundred words that I could email round to everyone working for Roundphase to explain my decision to leave. It read as follows:

I was with my sister's thirteen month old twins and I was watching them playing with one of those toys where you match the shape to the slot it needs to fit into. The impatient one, was trying to force the square one into the circular hole. This is when I realised that this is what I have been struggling with. I am like the square. I just

do not fit in the Roundphase System and that is fine. I have tried to become the circle, to man-up, to get over myself, to do the right things in the right way, but too much of me is lost in that process.

I've ended up performing poorly, letting people down all around and not achieving my best and what I know I am capable of. In trying to become the circle, the square is lost.

Many of you have really tried hard to help me understand what I should be doing and I sincerely thank you for this, it is not about whether I believe the Roundphase Method can help, because I do, I used it with many teams in the past and I am sure I will in the future, I just cannot fit in this system and still be me. So I must leave. I have talked to the managing director about this and he understands my reasons.

Despite being armed with this letter, which I shall return to later, I was extremely apprehensive about the meeting. I had known the managing director for ten years, ever since I had started working with Roundphase when I was a client as he had come on several occasions to see how things were going and taken us all out for dinner. Subsequently at events and conferences we always made time to say hello and have a quick chat. Latterly when I was Director of change and he was teaching at a nearby University every year we worked together to host a week long residential for his students, providing suitable opportunities to study the Council using Roundphase techniques and therefore learn about them. I knew the managing director well, but I had never asked for his help before. I kept thinking about how I would start to explain myself. Why was I finding it difficult to work within the company and therefore that I was going to leave.

I met the managing director and we went upstairs to the comfy seating area. He enquired what it was that I wanted to talk with him about. I took a deep breath and said something to him about my feeling that I did not fit into his system or felt I did not want to fit into it anymore. I went on to explain that there was no freedom or flexibility allowed in my practice. If I did something different it was deemed by colleagues to be wrong and therefore needed to be corrected. This happens frequently despite colleagues not being aware of the particular client or part of the organisation in which you are working. I was not used to this, I explained that

previously I had worked within an organisation where the constraints on what I could do with teams, and how I could use the techniques in that context, had only been associated with availability of resources or viability of starting projects, not evaluative judgements about my practice. If I could work with another Director to start a transformation project we negotiated how to do it and then used the Roundphase techniques to structure the way the work was undertaken. Sometimes this had required a great deal of innovation in order to stick to the principles of the Roundphase Method, whilst accommodating and working around organisational barriers. But despite having to adapt the standard way of doing things, I had never felt that what I ended up doing, and the way I ended up doing it, were not congruent with the overarching principles of the Roundphase techniques. I had often significantly assisted teams to overcome current work problems, which would have remained unaddressed if I had not innovated. I explained to the managing director these frustrations were entangled with the fact that in every project I had worked on in Roundphase, I was either on my own, or working with a different group of consultants who I hardly knew. I found this an additional difficulty, because I was seen as a new person in Roundphase, who's practice would therefore need adjusting, but there was never enough time to build up a relationship or sufficient understanding with others about what I could and could not do. This led to daily correction of my practice back to the standard ways of doing things, to 'the way we always do things around here'.

I stopped and looked over at him, he had let me talk, allowed me space to explain myself. I felt really listened to, and was glad I had come to see him. He was clearly perturbed by what I had said and stated that nobody should be making evaluative judgements about each other's practice, that was against our principles, and that I should tell him if anyone did this in the future and he would call them and give them an earful. He continued by reflecting on his own experience. He explained that in the beginning there were only a few people working closely together. They had not yet developed all the models and techniques we use now and so they all worked together innovating as they went and it was a good team. He explained that often the consultants were only one page ahead of the client, so were constantly talking and thinking about what to do next. When new people started they told them to sit down, listen and do as they were told because they did not know what they were doing or

how to explain it and therefore watching others was the only way to learn. This has been adopted as the way to teach newcomers to the company as it is the only way that seems to work, but he reflected that my experience should have been different because I already had years of experience, I knew what I was doing, which was why he personally had asked me to join.

As he was regaling me with the history of Roundphase and why he had wanted me to join he asked that if I was going to leave, I would come and talk to him first. As he was saying this, he stopped, looked at me and clarified that, that was what I was doing now. I nodded. He went on to reassure me that he really did not want me to leave, he had heard nothing about what I was doing that concerned him, people spoke highly of me to him, I should stick with it and keep talking to him.

### **Trying to innovate the consulting techniques**

The conversation moved on, the managing director began to talk about his desire to innovate and advance the Roundphase techniques. We discussed an event where he had invited everyone to come together at Wyboston to talk about it but subsequently he had wondered if we were incapable of innovation. He reflected to me his disappointment that the event had become stuck on topics that he called the perennial problems of Roundphase, for example if there will be enough work for all of us, how work that comes into the office gets divided up and what do we do about consultants that perform poorly or go under the radar, a regular occurrence where consultants keep what they are doing secret and hidden from others.

I thought back to the event. I had found it quite exciting. For me it had been an opportunity to meet and socialise with many of the consultants I had not met before, as it was the first time we had all been invited to an event since I had joined nine months before. A couple of groups were asked to consider how consultant's learning and development took place and whether any improvements could be made. In the notes of the event, the following paragraph is the external facilitators' summation of the discussions on this topic.

But the discussions also identified that different people have different views, not only on the overall outcome of what a 'developed' consultant should look like, but also on the nature and duration of the current development journey. Is this variety a 'good thing', in the sense of providing space for experimentation, and allowing for context? Or is it 'not such a good thing', in the sense of giving rise to confusion, and allowing for different standards?

(Roundphase, 2011)

Following the event, various subgroups met and worked further on some of the topics that emerged that interested them. There was a further event organised six months later to follow up, and people fed-back what they had explored with others in-between the meetings. These two meetings are still the only time we have all been invited to be together in the three years I have been with the company. At the second meeting and immediately after, most of the gossip with the people I spoke to was that it would all be a waste of time and nothing would change as a result. This was based partly on a feeling associated with who had not attended the two events. *They* had more important things to do with their clients, for which they were getting paid, unlike those at the event, but these key people were from the established group around the managing director who helped him form the company. People assumed he had clearly sanctioned their non-attendance, but as they were usually the targets of blame from people in the outsider group for most of the current problems, meeting without them seemed to the others to be a pointless exercise as they were the ones who needed to change. It feels to me now that in our conversation the managing director was also acknowledging that nothing had changed following these events and that, the company, as a group had become stuck in some way.

Returning to the conversation I had with the managing director I reflected to him that I thought part of the problem was also because we were so certain about things. Most consultants believe that if you could just execute all the Roundphase techniques perfectly you could get a predictably perfect result across a whole organisation, although this has never happened. This, I thought was ridiculous and that it would be helpful if he talked more about uncertainty. We laughed about the fact that clients and competitors often say that Roundphase is a cult. I agreed that it had often been said to me. I took the opportunity to ask directly why we were not a cult, in his reply

he remarked something to the effect that it was not for Sundays, it was just about the work. This did not seem a very convincing argument to me, but I did not take it any further. Instead, I took the opportunity to seek agreement with the managing director that he trusted me to try something new and he allowed me to work with people who I trusted on the job with City Council, in effect become Roundphase Consulting's lead for City Council. During that time, we would try to work differently together from previous experiences and would try different things with the client. He was fine with this and with a final reassurance that he did not want me to leave the company, he wanted to hear from me about what we had done, we said goodbye. I felt that I would commit to the City Council job and stop looking for other work, give it one last try and see what I could change.

### **Experience of doing something differently**

I felt that it was clear that I had permission to experiment. So I went back to Olivia and Emily and talked to them about my conversation with the managing director. I explained that he wants consultants to innovate and try new things so I wanted to try out my ideas for day one with the team. I think both Olivia and Emily felt a bit duped by my discussions with the managing director, as if I had gone over their heads, but agreed they would allow me to experiment in this way, but they made it clear it was my responsibility and it was on my head if there were repercussions from James. I happily agreed to this condition.

In subsequent reflection with both the client and my Roundphase colleagues the team initiation day was talked about as a great success. Everyone got to know each other, discuss the current struggles with work they were experiencing and learnt a bit about the Roundphase techniques. There was time for the group to negotiate how we were all going to work together, when some people would be there for a day a week and some people full-time. I remember at the time my colleagues reflected back to me that it was brilliant, but if other consultants found out what we had done we would be in so much trouble. They started to try to get me to make a pact with them not to tell anyone about it. At the time, I wondered how many other consultants were trying new and innovative things with clients but were not talking about it and why we were so afraid of breaking traditions associated with the way we were doing things.



Whilst I had envisaged resistance from my colleagues if I suggested breaking away from the accepted way of talking about Roundphase techniques with clients, what I had not taken into consideration was that I would also experience the same reaction from the client. During the work with Somewhere, I have had to deal with numerous questions from Oliver who commissioned us and who worked closely before with James, about when I will be talking to the team about certain Roundphase procedures, for example 'backbriefing'. This is something that I have never come across, nor, when I checked, had any of my other colleagues on the job, but I assume that James used with them previously in Housing to overcome a specific problem or for a specific purpose. In the same way as Roundphase Consulting have come to unquestioningly use one hundred and fifty PowerPoint slides to induct all new teams, Somewhere have included 'backbriefing' as part of their way of implementing Roundphase techniques. Because these innovations were part of a previously successful transformation, these specific procedures 'take the credit' and become known and adhered to as part of the way implementing a successful change takes place. I have not had to manage the clients' interpretations of what we do in Roundphase Consulting and how we do it as part of a client engagement before. I found this an additional difficulty on top of my colleagues' questions. It felt like I was constantly explaining that a consequence of one of the core principles in the Roundphase Method, which is to design client interventions against their need, meant each intervention would require unique interpretations of Roundphase techniques and would therefore be different from each other. Constantly justifying what I was doing was stressful, exhausting and lead me to question what I was doing, if what I was doing was the right thing for the client and the consequences facing me if I was judged to be wrong.

### **Themes emerging from the narrative**

What interests me about this narrative is the difficulty I am experiencing with both colleagues and the client when I am adapting or innovating the Roundphase techniques, although I do not see that what I am doing or talking about doing are major departures or changes. I see them simply as innovations required in this particular client situation and which should therefore be acceptable as part of

designing something to meet the individual client's needs. The overwhelming feelings of constraint on my practice almost result in me leaving the company, which leads me to ask; how have consultants come to see and understand the Roundphase techniques as so rigid, inflexible and unchangeable, whilst at the same time the managing director of the company and the person from whom most of these techniques originated, has been trying to help consultants to transform and innovate their practice?

### **Before there was a Roundphase method was every client an innovation?**

On YouTube, there is a video of the managing director talking to an audience about the evolution of the models and tools that have become recognisable Roundphase techniques, what he calls the Roundphase Method, explained in project one. He starts by saying: "What I want to do this morning is take you through a series of seminal moments, things that influenced us on the way to developing what we now call the [...] method" (Seddon, 2009). I think this opening statement is very interesting because not only does it demonstrate that there were a series of seminal moments, an evolution of thought, this was also clearly a collective 'us' experience. In the narrative I have presented above, the managing director talked directly to me about this. He describes the small, devoted group who worked together, seemingly hardly knowing what they were doing but working closely alongside the client to figure out what to do from one day to the next based on their previous knowledge and experience. In the video he further explains this, talking in great detail about the particular managers and situations they worked in and how they also influenced what they all did together.

What is interesting about this phase of the company's development, is the participation between client and consultant, jointly engaged in activity from which emerged changes that led to the client saving money or delivering improved relationships with customers. Unlike the way we would work now in Roundphase Consulting, this appears to have happened without the need for an overall plan, model, standard procedures or any guide as a reference. The managing director refers to this uncertainty in the narrative, saying that often they (the consultants) were only one page ahead of the client. However at no point in either my

conversation with the managing director or in the video is there a sense that without a developed model or technique they did not know what to do or were just waiting for some change to happen; although the outcome is unknown, the actions that led there were deliberate and undertaken with intention.

What was happening in the interactions between consultants and the client in those early days of Roundphase? Edgar H. Schein an American social psychologist who has studied organisational development, and particularly the role he sees managers have in changing organisational culture, would describe this type of consultation as, process consultation where “the consultant offers to become jointly involved with the client in figuring out what is the problem, why it is a problem, why it is a problem right now, and what might be done about it.” (Schein, 1978: 342). He contrasts this role with other forms of consultation associated with the role of the consultant either primarily as the knowledge expert, responsible for providing a solution to a specific problem specified by the client or what he calls the doctor-patient model where the client is dependant on the consultant for diagnosis and a prescription to implement. Although process consultation is a helpful description of the type of consulting process that Roundphase consultants were concerned with, in his paper Schein does not elaborate in detail about what is going on between the consultant and client when this is happening. However, this description does make it clear that, as reflected by the managing director both to me and in the video it would be highly unlikely that any two jobs would be the same. This way of working means that each client requires a new approach, every job requires novel and unique ways of doing things but how do these emerge?

What is involved in becoming involved and participating with the client, how does this lead to changes for the client and at this stage of Roundphase Consulting’s development what is guiding action and decisions that the consultants are making, remain unanswered questions that I will turn to now. Without an overall plan or model to help decide and agree actions with the client, this must have been negotiated with the client as things were taking place. This way of thinking about organisational change is discussed in project one. Therefore I would like to build on the argument described there by examining Stacey’s arguments further and understanding a key influence on his thinking, Mead, who he uses when describing

how communication takes place between one person and another, or between a group of people. I will describe how this communication guides action and if the changes that might result are innovations.

### **A conversation of gestures**

(Mead, 1934)

George Herbert Mead, an American Pragmatist philosopher developed a theory about human communication that does not rely on separating thought from action and in which meaning is created in the whole social act. To illustrate his theory of gesture and response he uses a fight between two dogs. He describes how the gesture of one dog creates within the other a response. For example, if the first dog takes an attacking position the other dog might also find himself taking an attacking position, on the other hand he may cower and run away. Meaning is created in the way the conversation of gestures takes place. If the second dog responds to the first dog by running away he is saying he cannot fight, perhaps he knows he cannot win, on the other hand if he takes an attacking position his attitude is demonstrating that he believes he can win or at least try to win. Mead points out the immediate and instinctive nature of what is taking place “[a] great deal has to be without deliberation” (ibid: 42-43).

He goes on to describe how this same conversation of gestures also occurs within oneself and how, with socialisation and experience the ability to anticipate the responses your gestures might evoke from a group grows. This leads, he argues to an ability to take the attitude of what he describes as “the generalised other” (ibid: 154) to yourself and therefore have an ability to predict how your gestures might be responded to by others, which acts within you by regulating the gesture you may make. He uses a baseball game as an example.

Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response. We get then an “other” which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process. (ibid)

What Mead is saying, is in making a gesture, taking the attitude of the generalised other to yourself, a collective expectation based on your experience of the responses your gesture may evoke in other members of the group, has the effect of self-restraint. One cannot simply do anything, because as you are making a gesture you are at the same time asking yourself, “what would the others think of me if I did?”, and adjusting your act accordingly, an on-going process throughout the conversation of gestures. I am arguing that at this stage of Roundphase Consulting’s development with no standard plans or models to follow, what is arising between the client and consultants is through this ongoing process of a conversation of gestures. This negotiation process is enabling and constraining what could happen. Through the social act meaning, perhaps even new meaning, is arrived at that opens possibilities for acting in different ways and therefore for change to occur. Stacey (2011) draws attention to this aspect within Mead’s concept of the generalised other in the following way.

The whole of society, in a generalised form, then enters the mental processes of each interdependent person. In a fundamentally important way, this constitutes a powerful form of social control through self-control.

(ibid: 335)

For Mead (1934) and subsequently Stacey (2011) this is a way of thinking about all human interaction. I am not saying therefore that there is anything special about the early phase in Roundphase Consulting’s development that makes the concept of the generalised other any more applicable than at any other time. It is a way of thinking about what is always happening between people in their everyday lived experiences. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that at this time, *all* the consultants are aware of and involved in the client situation and therefore can conceptualise a particular generalised other. Either when the consultants are discussing the job between themselves, to get one page ahead of the client, or when they are working in the client together, there is a shared, particular, context dependant understanding of the generalised other that is part of the social process. The method of social control that is affecting the gestures and responses the consultants feel they can make are due to an embodied generalised other that includes the specific client as part of the group.

In describing what is going on in this way I am thinking about social human interaction in which changes to meaning can always occur, as Mead (1934) describes above with the dogs, or through which we regulate our own behaviour by trying not to step out of line through methods of self control based on our assumptions of how others will see our acts. However, as Stacey (2011: 355) points out, generalised tendencies to act in one way or another have to be particularised in the situation one finds oneself in, which might give rise to conflict as one person acts in one way and another in a different way as they particularise the generalisation within the given social context. It is from this conflict, he argues, that small changes can occur to the way these generalised tendencies to act are understood and are therefore changed. Thinking in this way about what is happening in this early days of Roundphase Consulting, the change that clients are recognising as improvements following Roundphase consultant's involvement, arise from the different ways that generalisations, for example, being helpful to customers, are particularised, which may then change the meaning of that generalisation and therefore ways that people continue to particularise that generalisation. Hence a change or shift has occurred for the client. I am not arguing that changes are not occurring all the time as people within the organisation negotiate how to particularise a generalisation, what I am saying is through the involvement of the consultants one of these small changes that has emerged has been amplified in order for it to then be part of the generalisation that subsequently affects the conception of how to particularise that generalisation in the future. For example, other people will now be expecting me to be helpful to customers in one way rather than another and therefore I will feel obliged to do so.

But we are still left with the question of whether or not these changes to generalisations can be termed innovations. Fonseca (2002) who draws heavily on Stacey argues that innovation is not in the control of one person, nor is it a process that can be controlled or part of a rational decision making process from which an innovation arises. For Fonseca "...innovation emerges in self-organising interaction between many people...Innovation is not simply new things or new ways of acting but transformations in patterns of meaning" (ibid: 110). I think therefore that looking at what is going on in the early stage of Roundphase's development, it is fair to say that through becoming involved in the client situation, innovations emerged through social interaction, a conversation of gestures, where new ways to

particularise existing generalisations were seen as innovations to the previous ways the client was working. Making this argument, where what is going on is contingent to the situation, would also lead to the inevitable conclusion that the outcome in one client would always be different from the next because of the unique client situation. Even if the aim in two clients was the same, for example to support changes to the ways staff were being helpful to customers, the existing general tendencies to act in one organisation or group of people would be very different to the next and therefore new ways to particularise tendencies to act would also be different. Therefore every client assignment is an innovation in the way Roundphase consultants work as the way the consultants act is, of course, affected by the different client situation. However this unique, bespoke way of working is difficult to describe as a service and market in a commercial environment in a way that resonates with others and persuades them to purchase. This way of working also presents limits to the number of new recruits that the company can take on, as training and formal induction programmes cannot be designed for them. How these problems were overcome is what I want to turn to next.

### **The difficulty of explaining something intangible**

The managing director talked to me about the way in which in the early days of the company, new people were helped to understand what it was that Roundphase consultants did with clients, by describing that when new people started they were told to sit down, listen and do as they were told. Newcomers learned through processes of becoming involved in client work with existing consultants, initially watching and listening as others led the work and gradually gaining understanding, confidence and subsequently the ability to lead client work themselves. The managing director remarked to me that this was the only way to learn, partly because it was difficult to explain what the consultants were actually doing as I have explored above. Whilst it might be the best way for a newcomer to the company to learn by working alongside colleagues in order to figure out for themselves what to do, there is clearly a limit to your business if you can only be hired by either clients that have worked with you previously, with whom you have developed a personal relationship and a joint understanding of what it is you do, clients who recognise the same particular problem you worked on with someone else, or people who would take it

on trust that you would work out what to do. Sometimes it therefore becomes necessary as part of sustaining a company, to have a clearer definition of what you are doing or going to do with a client because you will have to explain this in order to win new business.

Kotler and Armstrong (2004) draw attention to this requirement as part of the nature and characteristics of a service, which should be understood as part of a service marketing strategy.

Service intangibility means that services cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard, or smelled before they are bought. [...] To reduce uncertainty, buyers look for 'signals' of service quality. They draw conclusions about quality from the place, people, price, equipment and communications that they can see. Therefore, the service provider's task is to make the service tangible in one or more ways.

(ibid: 299)

I believe that what customers or buyers could see, played an important part in the next steps that were taken. The managing director found himself in a competitive situation, where he wanted to draw attention to the limits of the strategy that the company he was working with was about to follow. Compelled by a sense of knowing the company was about to embark on forming a strategy that may not be built on the kind of insight he had been helping other clients to gain, he needed to demonstrate what his alternative was, and convince the managers they should take his advice rather than the other expert. The way he did this was to construct a competing model, a clear alternative to the one that was being presented by the other expert. At that moment the tangible model for check (Seddon, 2003: 114-115), described in detail in project one, came into existence. The creation of the model for check, was the beginning of the ability to bring structure, routine and procedure to what Roundphase consultants did with their clients. Together with the subsequent development of the models for the 'plan' and 'do' stages, also described in project one, the offering to the market became far more tangible and the way new recruits were taught what to do also subtly changed. The ways in which these changes affect what happens to the company and between consultants and between consultants and clients is what I shall explore now.



## **Changes in methods of social control as the company grows, the emergence of panopticism**

(Foucault, 1973: 58)

In the last twelve years Roundphase has grown from the initial small group the managing director referred to, into a company of between sixty and seventy people. Therefore, on average between five and six people a year were recruited and taught what to do and this is not allowing for people who have joined and left the company, which would increase this number further. This expansion also led to the development of ways to deal with enquiries for work as described above and the development of functional leads, James being the Housing lead and Olivia the Social Care lead, who are deemed to be experts at using the Roundphase techniques in their field. I believe the development of the models played a significant part in the company's ability to grow. Firstly, the models described the process that the consultant would take the client through and therefore gave some certainty and tangibility to clients about what the general service offering was. Secondly, experienced practitioners now had models describing in general what they had been doing with clients. They were not limited to teaching new entrants to the company solely through experience and working alongside them, they could use the steps and stages within the models to tell people what to do remotely and monitor their progress. The assumption made here was, as long as the learner consultant could do as they were being told, and execute the steps correctly, improvements would be delivered for the client and the consultant would, over-time learn how to execute the steps with sufficient proficiency not to need to be told what to do. The focus of teaching and learning became learning what each step meant and how to apply it in the client situation, a move away from the previous way of working associated with understanding what the client's problem was and how the consultant could work with them to solve it.

This change also meant the company could take on more client engagements by stretching the consultants more thinly, with less people on each job. Arrangements changed, often the most experienced lead consultants were working on other jobs and giving advice remotely to consultants who were learning what to do, in clients where the experienced consultants had never or hardly ever been. They were relying

on information provided by the learner consultant to help them understand what was going on and teach them how to take the next steps. I think this is how Olivia had perceived the intervention with Somewhere would work, I would work with them day to day and report back to her as the expert for Social Care and she could tell me what to do next. This pattern of behaviour has now evolved as an organisational norm. It has become universally accepted practice today for all consultants, as I refer to above. I am expected to discuss with other consultants who have not been in the client with me what my plans are for day one with the team and I am supposed to listen and take on board advice about what they would do.

This is also similar to the problem I am experiencing with the client, Oliver. During the previous work in the Housing department, he had worked closely with James and participated in some classroom delivered Roundphase training. He has therefore some experience of how Roundphase techniques work, however he admits he does not have the breadth of knowledge and understanding to lead the current work otherwise he would not have reengaged our consulting skills. Nevertheless, I am struggling with Oliver's assumptions about how things *should* be happening based on his previous experiences and what he has been taught about how the steps in the Roundphase models *should* be undertaken, when he is not involved day to day with the team and therefore does not know what is *actually* happening or required. However, he does not recognise the importance of understanding the context or situation and is talking about what he thinks should be happening with the team and other leaders in the organisation, which is making me feel managed and requiring me to constantly explain to people why we are not doing it exactly the same way as last time, or precisely as Oliver is expecting. This way of working is the same between consultants in Roundphase who comment or tell each other what to do without ever having been to the client site or having any first hand knowledge of the client. Or as described above, no conception of a client's specific context and situation because they have not been involved in it socially.

What I am asking here is how does the adoption and development of models that clearly coincided with the rapid expansion of the company affect the relationships between consultants and between consultants and clients? What are the effects of this change? I have described above that the adoption and development of models

and client leads has enabled a remote, arms-length method of supervision or judgement of each other's work, an expectation of how work *should* be done, which does not allow for or require contextual knowledge. In order to understand this I want to look at how Foucault (1973; 1977) describes how similar changes have taken place through history in European society associated with the emergence of a form of power he calls Panopticism (ibid, 1973: 58).

Foucault (1977) uses Bentham's Panopticon as a way of describing and understanding power relations and the subsequent internalisation of power. The Panopticon was an architectural formulation for the perfect prison. It consisted of a tall, circular central tower in the middle with windows on all sides, looking out towards and surrounded by a ring of cells stacked vertically on top of each other. This structure permits all prisoners to be "perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (ibid: 200) to the guards in the central tower, although through careful design, the prisoners cannot see or know if there is a guard present in the tower or who they are.

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functions of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary [...] that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.

(ibid: 201)

The structural intent of the Panopticon is efficient use of power, through surveillance. Prisoners are subjected to the constant threat of surveillance, which serves to control their behaviour, although they can never know if there are actually guards in the tower and who they are. The expectation of being watched, internalised in the prisoners leads them to control their own behaviour so that over-time the need to actually have guards in the tower in order to control the prisoners disappears. Foucault (1973) goes on to describe how this form of power, also leads to judgement, both about the person being observed and about whether or not what he is doing is the right thing or not.

A knowledge that now was no longer about determining whether or not something had occurred; rather it was about whether an individual was behaving as he should, in accordance with the rule or not, and whether he was progressing or not.

(ibid: 58-59)

I am proposing that the development of models in Roundphase Consulting, describing the steps that should be taken with clients, together with the establishment of experts, opened up the possibility of surveillance and judgement. Experienced consultants could see or find out how well a learner had executed the steps in the model and make judgements, not only about if the steps had been performed correctly but also about the learner themselves, if they 'got it'. I reflect feelings associated with this in the narrative. On several occasions I am worried about what will happen if I am judged to be doing the wrong things and so do Olivia and Emily, they are very anxious about others finding out we have done something different with the team on the first day. The growth of the company together with the development of the models permitted and required this form of power, Panopticism, to train newcomers. However, in doing this, the models developed an unquestionable quality, otherwise how could the instruction and judgement of the learner take place. The models and procedural techniques that were now tangible and being used to remotely instruct and supervise learners, therefore became beyond doubt and idealised. It became publicly accepted that the models and techniques were perfect, universally applicable and would always work. Any circumstances or situations where things did not happen as they should, was due to poor consultants or clients not taking the consultant's advice, never to the models or techniques themselves. In my resignation letter to the other consultants that I had prepared before I went to see the managing director, I had internalised this, stating I have performed poorly and let people down. However, as discussed above in connection with the concept of the generalised other (Mead, 1934) privately in each particular client situation consultants must be to some extent adapting the idealised, generalised models and techniques in order to make them relevant, appropriate and proportionate, in that context, it is just that they are not talking about doing it. In order to look more closely at this idealisation of models and techniques, I will return to Mead.

## **Idealisation and the formation of cult and cult values**

Mead (1923) warned about the consequences of social values becoming absolute and idealised in moral and social conduct.

[...] there are many values involved in our problems of social conduct to which we feel that we are unable to do justice in their whole import, and yet when they are once envisaged they appear too precious to be ignored, so that in our action we do homage to them. We do not do justice to them. They constitute our ideals. They abide in our conduct as prophecies of the day in which we can do them the justice they claim.

(ibid: 238)

I have described above how the Roundphase models and techniques have become idealised or what Mead would call cult values. Cult values are generalised but also idealised values of an institution. Mead argues that using the scientific method to examine issues of social conduct draws attention to the teleological nature of much of our social conduct. That is to say that it draws attention to where not all the values involved are being done justice to, because they serve to form the means of achieving some ends or final destination. Mead argues that the only way to counteract social values taking on this idealist characteristic and therefore becoming a cult value is the restatement of all values associated with a particular situation, “hitherto inviolable values, be brought together and so restated and reconstructed that intelligent conduct may be possible, with reference to *all* of them.” (ibid: 236) The models in Roundphase required functionalising or restating in the particular situations, clients, that consultants encounter daily. During this process of functionalisation, the cult values come into conflict with each other and in conflict with other social values and the understanding of how to functionalise them in a particular context gives rise to conflict between people. “For purposes of conduct, values define themselves definitely enough when they are brought into conflict with each other.” (Mead, 1923: 241). In the same way as I set out earlier, different ways that the generalisation of being helpful to customers is particularised in a given situation can give rise to conflict, Mead is saying that also happens when cult values of an organisation are functionalised.

This conflict can be seen clearly enough in the narrative. There is a certain cult value attached to beginning the team set up with the long PowerPoint slide presentation. In discussion with others, they confirm that it is the expected thing to do. But as I find myself thinking and talking with others about an alternative, what I think is the best way to start in this particular context, with this particular team, based on the knowledge of the organisation and the disparate nature of the team that are coming together, which I gained from being there for two days, I came into conflict with my colleagues who were resistant. They were willing me to maintain the cult value in the universally accepted, standardised way of doing things, in effect to exclude this value in the restatement of *all* values. As Mead (1923: 238) suggests they are willing me to do homage to that value, not justice to it. However, I still find their reaction to my suggestion surprising, because as I refer to above, I have not always started teams with the standardised PowerPoint presentation and I know that if I asked my colleagues individually, most would admit that they too have not always stuck to this script. It does not seem to make sense in the knowledge that others including Olivia who is working with me on this job, have not always done things in this way, that my suggestions raise such conflict. Therefore, instead of focusing attention on the resistance from my colleagues being associated with what it was we did, I would like to turn to another possibility, that the resistance was generated by the fact that I was talking to others from the established group, like the managing director, about what we did. I want to draw a distinction here between the possibility that objections I experienced from Olivia and Emily were not about what actually happened on day one with the team, that is to say whether or not we presented the PowerPoint slides, but rather, whether or not we talked to others about what we intended to do or what we had done and who we were likely to talk about this to.

### **What to talk about and with who, public and hidden transcripts**

In his book *Domination and the Arts of the Resistance*, Scott (1990) presents a description of power relations between the dominant and the oppressed. This resonated with my descriptions of Roundphase in project one as having an established and outsider group (Elias and Scotson, 1994). Scott provides a more polarized explanation of the two groups where the dominant have power over the

oppressed including what and how they can say things in public when both groups are present, what he calls the public transcript. For Scott (1990) the public transcript is a kind of performance, played out on both sides, to meet each others' expectations of what should be done in a particular situation, although what can actually be done and in what way is also controlled primarily by the dominant group. He contrasts this public transcript with conversations and gestures that take place behind closed doors between members of each group, that is to say when only members of the dominant group are together or when only members of the oppressed group are together. For this, he uses the term, hidden transcript "to characterize discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by powerholders" (ibid: 4). Scott's ideas and descriptions about hidden transcripts therefore contrast with Foucault's (1973; 1977) panopticism where the idea of being under constant surveillance is internalised and governs behaviour, which would for the oppressed group include the hidden transcript. Nevertheless I think that Scott (1990) provides a useful way to examine further whether the reluctance I was experiencing from Olivia and Emily to go along with my plan was not about what we were doing but about who I was talking to about it. Thinking again about panopticism within Roundphase Consulting and the kind of surveillance that operates, as discussed above, it is rarely through direct observation that judgements are made, only Olivia and Emily working with me in Somewhere know and can see what is actually happening with the client. Therefore surveillance and judgement by others can only happen through conversations Olivia, Emily or I have, not observation or participation in a shared experience. However, the fear of being judged incompetent, or the internalisation of this fear created though panopticism therefore becomes a powerful censor in the conversions undertaken in the public realm with those individuals deemed to have more experience or expertise, in the dominant or established group. I can see now that there is a difference between the hidden transcript that Olivia and Emily were trying to encourage me to keep hidden, the comprehensive descriptions of what was actually happening, and a public transcript that I could talk about with the managing director, James or others in the established group that overlooked the detail and maintained the cult values associated with what we were doing. By talking to others, outside the group working in Somewhere, about the specifics of what I was planning to do, I was bringing a hidden transcript into the public sphere.

Following this line of thought, the public transcript we are sharing between us across all members of Roundphase Consulting about our work, for example at the away days in Wyboston, is therefore subtly removing the details of the particular ways in which Roundphase models and techniques are being functionalised or particularised in specific contexts with clients. This therefore maintains and constantly re-creates their idealistic nature. Internalised fear of judgement has a powerful and controlling effect on the public transcript, sanitising the description of actual client experiences, reinforcing the cult value of the techniques and models Roundphase consultants use. In order to avoid surveillance and associated judgement or alleviate our fears associated with the internalisation of this threat, consultants are reinforcing with each other through conversation that we are all doing what we *should* be doing not talking about what we are *actually* doing. We avoid sharing the problems and issues we are experiencing in client situations and the novel ways, adaptations and innovations that are required, keeping these hidden. In my conversation with the managing director, he describes the conversations at Wyboston, when we are all together, as getting stuck on topics that are the perennial problems of the company, for me this is an excellent illustration of the public transcript in use. What *is* talked about is the publicly acceptable things that *can* be talked about when we are all together, the managing director who will have attended all such events is recognising the patterns within these conversations and is frustrated by them as they do not, for him contain the elements needed for innovation. This public transcript which therefore becomes stuck, reinforcing an ideal way things *should* be done can in turn be interpreted as a prescription of what to do without the need for specific context. Mead (1923) draws attention to the danger of institutions where there is prescription and rigidity about the implementation of cult values, with no allowance for functionalising or talking about how they have been functionalised. In this way, I would argue, we are talking publicly about what we do in Roundphase like a cult.

An institution should arise and be kept alive by its own function, but in so far as it does not function, the ideal of it can be kept alive only by some cult, whose aim is not the functioning of the institution, but the continued presence of the idea of it in the minds of those that cherish it.

(ibid: 240)



I am drawing a clear distinction here between what a consultant or group of consultants involved in a client situation is actually doing and how they talk about what they are doing with wider audiences. Working in the client situation, is no different from the early phase of Roundphase's development. Consultants have to become involved and participate within the client context. As described above, the specific and particular generalised other (Mead, 1934) which anticipates the tendencies to act of those involved in the same process, provide a powerful method of self control dictating what one can and cannot do in that situation. Within that context consultants are particularising, functionalising the general Roundphase models and techniques with the client. Each and every situation the consultant is faced with will be different, it will be particular to a specific team, place, time, company and area of work. There can be no universal prescription to follow for how to do something because it could not take into account all the possible computations involved in all the possibilities that a consultant could ever encounter. Slightly different ways of doing things, adaptations and innovations must be made to the way the models are used in order to make them relevant and useful, taking into account all the specifics of a situation. However, I am arguing that these changes, innovations, adaptations that have to be made in the client situation, are not usually openly talked about, they form part of a hidden transcript. This means they stay hidden, local and cannot be taken up or lead to a change in the overall global patterns associated with the way the Roundphase techniques are implemented. I would now like to add some additional thoughts about why consultants might create the different transcripts about what they are doing, by bringing in the concept of double bind.

### **Finding yourself caught in a double bind**

Bateson (1956) developed a theory about circumstances where a person feels caught by conflicting statements or options where both need to be fulfilled in order to have done the right thing. The person finds themselves knowing that in taking action to satisfy one option, it is at the same time impossible to also satisfy the other, leaving an option unfulfilled. It is impossible to do the right thing, as there is always one way that action or inaction can be judged as wrong. The person is therefore caught in a double bind (ibid). I think that this is a very useful way of thinking about the experience consultants go through when working with a client. In the day to day

interactions, as I have described above, the generalised other provides the method of social and therefore self control associated with what at any given moment a consultant can or cannot do. However within Roundphase Consulting a form of power called panopticism (Foucault, 1973) has internalised for the consultant how the models and techniques of Roundphase *should* be undertaken. In effect there is operating alongside the constraints of what can or cannot be done in a client the additional constraints associated with the generalised other constituted by other consultants who will judge you.

I would argue therefore that the consultant is in a double bind, caught between methods of social control within the client (Mead, 1934) and methods of social control associated with how you feel you *should* be implementing the idealised Roundphase models. As a consultant working with the client you find yourself caught between doing what you *can* do and doing what you think you *should* be doing. I am in this situation in this narrative, caught between what I should be doing and what I (and others) think I ought to be doing. The development of a public and hidden transcript therefore becomes one way a consultant can resolve the situation, doing what is necessary but talking publicly about how it is done in ways that are congruent with what *should* have been happening. Adopting this approach as discussed above, removes the details of the changes, innovations and adaptations that a consultant has had to make to the Roundphase models and techniques in a client situation. These innovations, which are not discussed with others remain local within that particular situation and cannot be amplified globally through others also adopting them in their practice, because they remain hidden. However, there is another way to resolve the double bind consultants find themselves in, which is the route James took. I can see now this was also the approach I was trying to take in this narrative, through my openness to talk about what I planned to do and subsequently what I actually did, I was attempting to gain credibility for taking an innovative approach..

### **Making your innovations public and becoming a Roundphase lead**

I have argued that innovations that happen in a client situation are usually talked about only in a hidden transcript because that is a way for consultants to resolve the

feeling of double bind, of never doing the right thing. However, there are occasions when a consultant leading a job does take a risk and talks more openly about innovations they have developed with a client, resolving the double bind in a different way. Often these times would be associated with when the client had delivered large cost savings or improved their customer performance from worst to best in the country, in other words, when the engagement has been perceived as very successful and is recognised as such by the client. This is the experience I have described with regards to James and the previous engagement with Somewhere City Council in the housing department. Oliver and his manager, publicised the outcomes of their work together very widely, they were shortlisted and won several international awards for the results that had been achieved. They did not keep their work as a hidden transcript, in fact it could not have been made more public. This included innovations and adaptations that James had made in the client situation which were generally regarded as novel ways to overcome certain issues that many other consultants recognised as problems they too had encountered with clients. As I described earlier, James received much kudos as a result, he was recognised for this work and because he had demonstrated his expertise at working with and transforming a Housing department, was appointed lead for Housing.

The point I am making by using this illustration is that James shared the details of what he had done publicly, he overcame any internalised fear of judgement and took a risk to make what had happened part of the public transcript, resolving the double bind in a different way. He used the client's view that what had been achieved was successful in order to overcome any criticism about his practice within Roundphase Consulting. In return for taking this risk, he received much recognition and autonomy, as he now has control over a whole area of work and all the client requests for work that come in for that area, a prestigious and lucrative position.

## **Conclusions**

At the end of project one I wanted to look at an example of a situation I often found myself in, what I described as a conflict of loyalties where I experience the inconsistency between the actions my colleagues (from the outsider group) who I am working with want to do, what I feel members of Roundphase's established group

expect and want me to do and what the client wants me to do (my loyalty towards my customer). What interested me about the specific narrative I present here in project two was why I experienced such apprehension from my colleagues and confusion from my client when designing and delivering something slightly different for an almost new area of work, which should therefore have been ripe for experimentation and innovation. However talking to them and others about my plans seemed to have the opposite effect to what I expected, rather than endorsement and a licence to go ahead, I was faced with resistance and anxiety. Feeling my practice is constrained to the point that it is impossible for me to continue to work for the company I go to see the managing director to resign. However, in that conversation with him, he talks to me about wanting to innovate and how in the early days of the company nobody knew what they were doing, in effect they were just making it up as they went along with the client. He gave me the permission to go ahead and experiment. In approaching the client work differently, I still encounter resistance from my colleagues and the client, particularly about telling other consultants what we have done.

Reflecting now on this narrative, and on the work of Foucault (1973; 1977); Mead (1923; 1934); Scott (1990) and Stacey (2011) to try to reach a different understanding, I will below describe an alternative way of seeing and interpreting the actions of myself and others which does not become particular to this situation and is about how structure and rigidity develop as the consultancy matures and grows.

The emergence of the tangible models and techniques that are the hallmark of Roundphase Consulting, necessary for its survival in the marketplace, have resulted in remote methods of learning and consultant development becoming common practice. Consultants were originally only concerned with being part of one group, together with the client, where every client was an opportunity to innovate practice, whereas now there is, at least an internalised conception of another generalised other that watches what you do and judges you. This creates a double bind for consultants who cannot do either what they feel is right for the client or what they feel is expected of them from those with more experience and expertise in the company. In order to resolve this double bind, consultants often keep hidden the details of the innovations that have to be made in the client context in order for the highly

generalised models and techniques Roundphase has developed to work. Descriptions of what actually happens, most often remains the subject of a hidden transcript. In public, descriptions are censored by the anxiety associated with the anticipated judgement, so idealised descriptions are used about what has taken place. The public transcript becomes a reinforcing mechanism that we are all creating that in turn is creating for us the internalised anxiety associated with not following the public transcript. The public transcript maintains for Roundphase the way generalisations *should* be particularised within a client.

Occasionally the double bind this creates is resolved in a different way and hidden transcripts in the sense of the detail of what has actually taken place with a client are made public. Often this is because the client feels the work delivered is very successful. In return for taking this risk, the consultant concerned receives huge recognition, because the managing director of the company wants consultants to innovate, to return back to the days when innovations happened all the time, something he thinks the company is now incapable of. Gaining recognition, normally results in becoming the Roundphase lead for a particular area, elevates your status within the power hierarchies and explicitly permits deviation from the standard acceptable ways of doing things. I would argue this freedom from the idealised way of doing things is what I was seeking. By securing this opportunity in a new area of work, which should have been a perfect candidate for innovation and experimentation, it presented an opportunity for me to demonstrate my competence in adapting the Roundphase techniques. Had I been successful, this recognition would have permitted me the freedom and flexibility to use the techniques in new ways with clients, which in turn, could have resulted in changes to the global patterns, to the ways the current idealised models were used and understood.

In project three I want to understand more about processes of improvisation and innovation in relation to the global patterns that are emerging from our local interaction together. Is there a difference between improvisation and innovation and how do these emerge in social processes? I will examine my experience after leaving the consulting company discussed in this project and recount a narrative from my first experience of freelance consulting, where I was not constrained or required

to use any particular method or technique and I find myself moving away from their use entirely.

### **Project three: Gestures of provocation and blocking: processes of improvisation and innovation**

#### **Introduction**

In project two I argued for an alternative perspective to the view of consultants as responsible for and in control of delivering organisational innovation through the use of models and techniques, presenting an argument that innovation takes place as part of ongoing social processes as transformations in the pattern of meaning take place (Fonseca, 2002: 110). As we act together through what Mead describes as “a conversation of gestures” (1934: 42) we are enabled and constrained through processes of social control and although we act with intention, no one person can necessarily dictate what happens. Innovations arise during conversation or local interaction and are reflected in changes to the global patterns.

Thinking about innovation in this way is similar to Bogers and Larsens’ perspective. They also present innovation from a complexity perspective, arguing that if something new is to emerge through processes of innovation “it has to be the consequence of relating in which the nature of interaction is more radically improvised” (Bogers and Larsen, 2012: 3). They are not alone in relating innovation to improvisation; Stacey argues that changes take place all the time within local interaction as improvisations to generalised tendencies to act are particularised in each unique context we find ourselves in, which may at the same time create new population-wide patterns as the meaning of the generalisation is changed (2011: 353). Here improvisation is seen as “the social interaction emerging between people all the time...spontaneously responding to each other’s gestures” (Friis, 2006: 86).

How can we understand and distinguish the more radical improvisations proposed by Bogers and Larsen in processes of innovation, from improvised action that is taking place all the time? They describe radical improvisations as *invitations* “conscious or unconscious moves that encourage the involved people to take spontaneous moves together in a mutually improvised context” (Bogers and Larsen, 2012: 1) which interrupt the taken for granted, reified patterns in conversational interactions.

Within this project I would like to explore different ways I have found myself and others creating, proposing, accepting and rejecting such invitations (Bogers and Larsen, 2012: 3) through my work as a consultant by presenting narratives of my experience with a recent client. Through reflexively exploring these experiences I will present my understanding of the role of improvisation in organisations and its relation to processes of innovation and change.

**Narrative: Background to the client situation and failing to accept an *invitation***

Through a mutual friend who knew I was looking for my next assignment an opportunity had arisen for me to work directly with Sophie again. We had worked with each other six years previously when I was her employee. I had really enjoyed working together and she had an inspirational effect on me. I admired her, she was a strong, confident female leader in local government, now CEO of a large County Council and leading the way for woman in top positions in local government, I longed to follow in her footsteps. We met face to face and she explained that she wanted my help with Highways, they had recently outsourced part of the service and it was now in total disarray, causing her political problems and she wanted me to come and ‘sort them out’. In hindsight, as I was sitting talking to her, I was so keen to get this assignment and work with Sophie again, to not have to travel as much and settle in my new home having just moved, I was not really paying enough attention to what she was actually saying or trying to tell me. Rather, I was quite nervous, treating it like a job interview and focused on convincing her that I could do the job, explaining I had worked with six local highway authorities and changed them all for the better. I was so pleased when she agreed I could start, I had achieved what I wanted. However, I now see that I may have missed an opportunity to accept Sophie’s *invitation* to explore with her more fully what the real problems were and how she expected me to deal with them. Rather than getting into a highly spontaneous conversation, loosen control (Bogers and Larsen, 2012: 3) and truly explore together what the issues were and how we might solve them, I stayed focussed on telling her she really needed me, which on reflection I think she had already decided before the meeting.



## **First impressions and getting a sense of the game**

On the first day, Isla the Director for Highways and Transport met me. I had talked with her previously about the background to the new contract and some of the associated changes that had taken place. She introduced me to Lewis, her direct report and who from my understanding was the person along with his two direct reports Logan and Harry, I would be working with on the required changes. She reiterated that I had her full support and left us to it. Lewis seemed really awkward and clearly did not want to talk to me very much. It felt as if he made some enquiries about what I was going to do out of politeness, saying that he had arranged for me to meet some key people over the next couple of days to help with my report. I remember a sinking feeling coming over me when he said this. I thought my way of working as a consultant was not to present reports but work with people to see what innovations might arise, but I did not say this. After this very brief exchange he showed me to my desk, which was in the other half of the building almost as far away as possible from where he and the other highways managers sat, with separate kitchen and toilets. I was with the admin team, who were all women. I immediately made a judgement about the gendered implications of his choice to sit me there, thinking it was clearly a way to undermine my credentials and put me in my place. At the time I did not also see this as powerful way of keeping me out of the way, out of the loop, together with what I interpreted to be deliberate attempts to ignore my contacts, I had very little communication with Lewis, Harry and Logan.

Over the next couple of weeks I met and talked with many people across the service and the council, some Lewis had arranged, others I arranged for myself or with the help of my newfound friends in the admin team. I rekindled relationships with many people I had worked with before, some who I had known for over fourteen years. Adopting this improvisational approach and building these relationships became very important later on, which I will come back to.

Through these conversations, I formed some impressions about the way the department functioned, what the key predictable patterns were, how they operated and whether consciously or not, how the management team of Lewis, Harry and Logan maintained the status quo. These observations, which I will now elaborate on,

I also shared and discussed with Sophie. Firstly, the managers had developed a highly sophisticated way of preventing change, but appearing to support it. They would begin by agreeing that changes needed to take place, they would ask the central change team or someone like myself to undertake the necessary work with staff to prepare a report with recommendations. When the reports were presented all the recommendations would then be rejected for one of a number of predictable reasons. These were either the audit section would not agree, the legal department gave an opinion that it was exposing the council to more risk, the highways contract stated the opposite and could not be changed, or if none of these fitted, in desperation they would resort to we have done it before or knew someone else that had and it did not work. The result was therefore that no changes were ever agreed and taken forward; they were all blocked, maintaining the existing power relations with Lewis, Harry and Logan in charge and in control of things in the way they wanted. They were skilfully avoiding changes the central change team or myself working for Sophie were trying to support them to deliver in order to make the necessary savings or performance improvements required of them by the senior management team.

Secondly, whatever went wrong the management team maintained it was always the fault of the new contractor who was substandard and could not deliver. The managers maintained this narrative by setting targets of 100% that would never be met, refusing to provide clear work orders in sufficient time to allow the contractor to line up resources, which caused cost overruns and delays. This resulted in very poor relationships at all levels between the contractor and the council. As this pattern of blame was iterated, contract board meetings between senior council staff and the contractor were a fight and staff lower down in the organisation stopped cooperating with their counterparts which caused further degradation of service and became the source of many of the complaints Sophie was receiving.

Remembering a time when Sophie had corrected every instance in a report I had written of 'manned' to 'staffed' because of the gender implications, I did not raise with her the final pattern that other women and I in the department had talked about, the gendered dynamics. In these initial weeks many women had used the opportunity to talk to me about how they experienced working in highways. These conversations often revolved around similar themes: the department being run by

fifty year old grey men in suits whilst the women (who appeared highly feminised wearing skirts, high heels and make-up) worked in admin or more junior roles carrying out their orders. Some women talked to me about instances where men had been promoted above them despite being less well qualified. Women who were from the corporate team or the contractor, and therefore in higher positions, talked about how glad they were to have another woman at board meetings to support them and talked more openly to me than Logan just did not know how to get on professionally with women. I had experienced this first hand, when he had made lewd comments and suggestions to me and in my presence. These conversations served to reinforce my own initial impressions, that women were not treated as equals by Lewis, Harry and Logan, which annoyed me.

I think it is quite a familiar pattern that when a consultant, like myself, is brought in to work with a department they will meet individually with staff from across the service who might talk much more openly about how they see things operating, than they would with an existing manager. As I undertook such meetings I observed how processes of proposing and accepting *invitations* takes place between myself and the staff member in order for potentially new understandings to emerge. Initially in the conversation there are preliminary ways in which we are testing each other out, working out whether or not to trust the other person, or if their information seems credible and reliable. Sometimes the conversation goes no further than this, in the sense that what is exchanged is already known in some way, existing patterns are repeated and no new meaning develops. However if spontaneous *invitations* are proposed and accepted often a kind of mutually beneficial confiding process takes place. The member of staff to a greater or lesser extent trusting the consultant to listen, understand and subsequently act, conveys information or knowledge about things that would not normally be said, which at the same time enables the consultant to test ideas and have the necessary background and feel for the situation that permits planning and action. For me, this is more than just information gathering, it is building relationships, gaining insight and understanding about the power relations, history of the department, organisation and the stories that are told about it. This is developing understanding of the specific contextual relationships and how they operate in the particular situation, including how people react to me. What I am doing is negotiating my way into the game, by demonstrating to others what

Bourdieu calls having a “sense of the game” (2004: 50-51) together with a propensity to take part in it. Bourdieu uses the term game when talking about social interaction. He describes “A player who is involved and caught up in the game adjusts not to what he sees but to what he fore-sees” (1990: 81). I am therefore describing what I am doing as getting a feel for the game, because I am using my conversations with others to understand the history and contextual information which are part of playing this particular game and by doing so also taking part in it.

### **The battle lines are drawn**

Although I had shared my insights with Sophie and she had subsequently given me her blessing to change things, I felt conflicted about how to proceed. Isla who had given me a lot of support had recently left and I did not really know Noah who was taking over from her. I suspected that if I presented reports or ideas to Lewis, Logan and Harry they would be treated in the same way as all the previous attempts and be rejected. I wondered if they might agree to give me some staff to work with so that perhaps we could get something going through trying to create changes in local interactions. The changes then might be seen as coming from their own staff, which could be more palatable and acceptable to them. I weighed up a number of other alternatives but as this seemed to me the most likely course of action to be agreed, I decided to present it to the July board meeting, which was Noah’s first meeting. I explained what I intended to do and how I saw this team comprised of members of staff from across the council and the contractor helping us to move forward. Lewis, Logan and Harry took turns to disparage my ideas, telling me that it was impossible because everyone was too busy and reiterated that they had told me a number of times I should be working with the contractor as it was them that needed to change rather than council staff. Of course representatives from the contractor also disagreed with them and did their best to support my ideas but this did not result in any of them being taken up. After the meeting I felt hopeless, I had no idea how I would work with them to change anything when they would never speak to me unless we were in board meetings and rejected all of my suggestions. I doubted my capabilities as a consultant and wanted to give up and find something else to do. But then there was the thought of how I would tell Sophie and what would I say? That it is impossible to change highways? The patterns are so fixed and rigid they can never

be changed? Alongside this, I was also very angry; I had come in and consistently tried to support the highways managers to change, to help them keep their jobs and this was the thanks I got. So I decided that I would no longer see myself as there to help, support and encourage Lewis, Harry and Logan to change but to change my tactics and attempt things differently. Improvising my approach, I focussed on trying to think how I would achieve the changes Sophie desired, despite them; it was now a ‘them and us’ situation.

### **Creating invitations**

Not really having any clear plan or idea of what to do to change things, I decided that I would spend time with front-line staff from both the council and the contractor and find out in more detail what they did and see what, if anything came from it. I called the contacts I had met previously. Most of them were managers or supervisors so I sought their permission to talk to their staff and agreed mutually convenient appointments. To start with staff were apprehensive and wondered why I was talking with them so I put them at ease by saying I was trying to find out what the real issues were with the contract. In every case this resulted in a very frustrated, angry reaction with either the council staff saying the contractor was incapable or the contractor saying the council needed to shape up to meet their expectations in the private sector. After the initial venting of annoyance I asked them about what they did and rather than sitting in a meeting room I persuaded them to show me and explain to me the things that frustrated them in more detail. In doing this, which staff felt was a bit strange to begin with, I discovered that the contract was not the only change that had taken place. Simultaneously new IT systems had also been implemented, replacing hand written job sheets. Becoming curious about how the new IT had changed how people worked, I asked lots of questions about whether staff knew exactly what they needed to do with the new systems, if they knew which fields of information went to the contractor and how to use the new systems to check up on work they had sent through. Conversely on the contractor’s side I asked the opposite questions about whether job information was complete and understandable and how often they had to call the council for further clarification or information.

Creating these *invitations* to explore what was happening in detail together spontaneously opened up new meanings, in what had become an established blame pattern between the council and the contractor, as discussed earlier. On the council side, sitting together using the new IT systems, it became clear to me, and everyone who tried to show me how they worked, that they did not really know how to use the new systems very well. Everyone had a different way of doing things, staff were muddling through. They were certainly not expert enough to provide Councillors with the answers to the questions they were consistently asking about progress of jobs. On the contractor's side we found out that the people responsible for doing the work never got all the information supplied by the council as some fields of information were not transferred from the council's IT system to the contractor and where vital information was not present, they never called the job originator to fill in the blanks. As a result they could not start some jobs and complete others to the council's satisfaction. With this insight some people started to work differently, making small changes that helped to get the work done more effectively and this was later supported by more IT training and encouragement to just pick up the phone and talk to each other rather than send blaming emails. However, there was still something that I could not find an answer to and that was what progress had been made with a number of jobs some that had been raised over eight months previously.

### **The invisible backlog of jobs**

I had already arranged to talk with Ava at the contractor about what I was finding out and how things were going. I looked forward to spending time with Ava as we got on well together and shared similar views about Highways. She was also very keen to see changes, particularly having previously worked with Lewis, Logan and Harry as part of the internal change team at the council. We were having a coffee and I explained where I had discovered and brought about some quite easy changes that would help, but I thought the key problem, and the one that was filling up Sophie's inbox with complaints, were the jobs that the Councillors had ordered. Some of these had been outstanding for over eight months, since the beginning of the contract and the council teams could not seem to find out any information about their progress. I remember thinking Ava was going to show me a quick way for the teams to check, then I could go back and demonstrate this to the teams and all would be

well. She too looked fairly confident that this was not going to be a problem. I gave her one of the order numbers from the list of outstanding jobs I had collected from the council teams. She typed it into the system and then looked quizzical. She asked for another and then another, looking more and more concerned until she said she was going to run a report. The report contained 850 jobs all of which were outstanding, most of which either Councillors had ordered or were trying to find out about and report progress to the Town or Parish councils who had requested them. We were both stunned and shocked. The jobs were allocated to a priority that gave the contractor a year to complete them, so technically they were not outstanding, but that was not going to be an acceptable explanation to Councillors. As we looked into it in more detail we discovered they had been given a status on the IT system that meant the contractor had looked at them but judged that there was insufficient information from the council to progress them. Apparently, individuals in the contractor had been chasing staff at the council for the information and where this was forthcoming, jobs had been taken forward and completed but often the information had not been and therefore a huge backlog of work had built up.

### **Feelings of relief and anxiety**

I remember having mixed feelings about this discovery. I felt partly relieved because I could now see where all the political problems were originating and why Councillors were complaining about unresponsiveness, lack of progress and delays. On the other hand I was pleased, I had found something that demonstrated poor service delivery was not all the fault of the contractor, which I knew was a pattern that had to be broken through to really transform the service. I was also quite gleefully anticipating presenting this situation to Lewis, Harry and Logan at the next board meeting whilst at the same time dreading their reaction.

The day of the board meeting arrived and I remember my partner commenting how unusually I was dressed for work wearing a dress, high heels and make-up, although he thought this was becoming more habitual. I did not really have an explanation and my thoughts were distracted by thinking through what might happen at the meeting but did think to myself, “I do normally always wear trousers”, which worried me. Judith Butler uses the term improvisation when describing her theory of

gender performativity (2004: 1). Her description of gender is that it is culturally constructed and constantly performed, improvising in both a repetitive, iterative way which has the potential for producing novelty at the same time (1988: 531). It seems that I was performing gender in ways that were novel and a surprise to me and were entangled with the work in significant ways. I shall return to this point later.

### **Blocking: Inability to break well-known repeating patterns**

I ran over and over in my mind how I thought the meeting would go, but could not get a clear sense of how I anticipated what might happen. However, when the time came, I threw myself into it, accepting the unknown, unpredictable nature of what might occur. When the agenda reached the item about the backlog I talked through what I had been doing and how I discovered the backlog, which was the reason for most of the complaints about the service. I made some proposals about how to take things forward primarily based on enabling council staff to work alongside the contractor and provide the necessary information in order to schedule and complete the jobs. As I have described above, I was really unsure about what I was expecting their reaction to be, but I do not think I ever anticipated what actually did happen. Harry and Logan used the backlog of jobs as a further example of the contractor's incapability. They started to argue aggressively in the meeting with anyone who disagreed with their view and who tried to put forward the suggestion that their teams, the council teams, would have to spend some time resolving the problem. They would not agree to it and they would not be persuaded otherwise, it was a very uncomfortable and tense discussion. Eventually, they proposed that Ava and I should resolve the problem with the contracting teams, as if we were responsible for creating the problem. Having no other 'acceptable' options presented, this is what the board agreed.

### **Finding new possibilities for change**

After the meeting I met with Noah. We had started to build a relationship but I did not feel that he saw things in the same way as Sophie and I, because he relied heavily on Lewis for knowledge of highways, repeatedly telling me he was a 'good bloke'. In a way I felt Noah had not really believed my version articulated during previous



attempts to explain the problems in Highways. Therefore, I was reluctant to talk through the backlog and what had happened at the board, because I wondered how Noah would respond to this, but I took a deep breath and tentatively explained that I saw this as a great example of how the highways management team blamed the contractor and by doing so demonstrated a lack of leadership and avoidance of responsibility. I explained that consistently repeating this pattern over and over was what was perpetuating the problems in highways and maintaining them in a stuck position with a poor service. Unless council staff had permission to work through refining the work instructions for the jobs, the contractor had no obligation to deliver the works, jobs would be further and further delayed and more and more complaints would ensue. I remember putting these points forward as persuasively as I possibly could, trying to bring Noah over to my side, to see things the way I did. I was very strongly proposing an *invitation* to Noah to engage with me in a different way than we had up to that point about my views on the situation and what I thought he should do. Slightly to my surprise Noah agreed with my point of view, although he disclosed I had not been the only person who had talked to him about the way Harry and Logan had behaved and he said he would call a meeting with them and Lewis and make sure they gave permission to staff to work through the problem together with the contractor with help from Ava and myself. He shared with me that he had begun to have regular meetings with them and serious conversations about how they led and managed the service as he could see now that this had to change in order to transform the service. He was glad of my challenge, support and input and for finding the root cause of many of the complaints, although there was still a long way to go to complete the jobs and reassure Sophie and the politicians he could see how things would get better.

### **Improvisation and/or innovation?**

There are examples in the narrative above where existing strategies were exhausted and I just invented my strategy as I went along and attempts at improvisation and innovation, when I am trying to shift the existing highly reified patterns associated with existing perceptions, about the contract for example. So far I have presented ideas from Friis and Stacey about improvisational activity “which is certainly not haphazard, impulsive or thoughtless activity, but highly complex, skilled

performances of interdependent people” (Stacey, 2006: 138) and radical improvisations referred to by Bogers and Larsen as *invitations* whether accepted or not which might lead to innovation. Before I explore these explanations further I would like to review other perspectives about organisational improvisation and how these fit with my experience and understanding of processes of improvisation and innovation.

“Since the mid 1990s improvisation in organizations has attracted increasingly more attention from scholars of organizations” (Vendelø, 2009: 449). This is because improvisation is seen as a way to deliver desirable organisational traits, especially learning. For example, Barrett describes improvisation as “maximising learning and innovation” (1998a: 605), whereas Orlikowski states “flexibility, customization, and learning” (1996: 63) are the primary concerns of organisations, which is why improvisation is important. In their review of the topic, Cunha, Cunha and Kamoche (1999: 327) present both positive outcomes of improvisation as “(1) flexibility; (2) learning; (3) motivation; and (4) affective outcomes”, and negative outcomes as “(1) biased learning; (2) opportunity traps; (3) amplification of emergent actions; (4) over-reliance on/addictiveness to improvisation; and (5) increased anxiety.” All of these definitions describe improvisations as synonymous with making a change in an organisation, with little distinction therefore between improvisation and innovation. Returning to the narrative above, it is worth examining where improvisation occurs, for example when I talk to front-line staff in the Highways department. As we explore together, spontaneously what is happening and why it is happening through my questions and their responses, new meaning emerges. It is a creative process of learning that ultimately results in changes to working practices. This way of thinking about what was happening would fit with improvisation as developing learning opportunities and innovation as discussed in the definitions above. However, take one of the situations where Lewis, Harry and Logan, faced with my intentions to transform things, prevented change from happening. They nearly always did this through blocking me, not agreeing to my suggested course of action. For example, by not providing a team for me to work with, they maintained control and perpetuated the existing patterns and structure. But were they not also improvising then? I would argue that they are, improvising to keep things the same. Why is this

aspect not covered by the literature and the focus is on improvisation as processes of change?

In their review Cunha et al. examine the metaphors used by authors writing about organisational improvisation. Their work demonstrates the huge influence and heavy reliance on jazz or improvisational theatre throughout the stages of theoretical development about organisational improvisational. They draw attention to the lack of discussion about “the limitations of jazz and improvisational theatre as a metaphor for organizational improvisation” (1999: 301). However, for me this is exactly why this important aspect of improvisation as **not** changing has been ignored in the literature. Keith Johnstone, widely regarded as the founder of improvisational theatre and the creator and developer of techniques to improve improvisational performance, explains that “bad improvisers block action, often with a high degree of skill. Good improvisers develop action” (1981: 95). Taking this stance which is pertinent to the quality of performance desired, adds a judgement about what improvisation is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’. However, Johnstone is recognising blocking as improvisational, although not as a skill that he wishes to develop in actors who want to be ‘good’ at improvisation and create excellent scenes and performances. He goes on to explain that in order to develop ‘good’ improvisers, exercises that discourage acts of blocking are to be practiced. I would argue therefore that relying on metaphors from theatre where blocking activity is regarded as ‘bad’ improvisation is exactly why this aspect is not taken up within the thinking and writing about organisational improvisation. Because blocking, although improvisational, is seen to deliver poor performances, this improvisational activity is to be discouraged. The goal of most organisational researchers would be to examine instances or circumstances where improvisation could be enhanced or maximised in order for the organisation to benefit from its outcomes. It is likely therefore, that they would study instances of improvisation that has led to a change occurring, to understand why, when and how it is taking place. They would exclude blocking as part of improvised actions to be studied as it is blocking action and understood from the theatre metaphor to be ‘bad’ improvisation. I would argue that this explains why the focus of organisational improvisation research based on metaphors from improvisational theatre has been focused on improvisation as synonymous with change as this is regarded as good improvisation, building the scene and delivering

an excellent performance. So if this explains why **not** changing is ignored within literature based on improvisational theatre, what about when the most commonly used metaphor, jazz is used as a basis for organisational improvisation?

Throughout the literature based on jazz improvisation, it is difficult to see any analogy to blocking, because again the opposite effect is practiced in order to deliver a good performance. Often described as a technique called ‘comping’, which means “lending harmonic and rhythmic support” (Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha, 2003: 2027) this is taught to enable performers to underpin and accompany soloists effectively. Barrett recognises that this can also include “provoking the soloist in [a] different direction” (1998a: 617) but that “if everyone tries to be a star and does not engage in supporting the evolution of the soloist’s ideas, the result is bad jazz (ibid). Kamoche et al also recognise that “the social experience of jazz improvisation is defined by both collaboration and competition” (2003: 2027). Competitive behaviour, typified by trying to out do each other and brinkmanship, is always balanced by collaboration in order to deliver meaningful performance (ibid). However, Peplowski recognises the difference between behaviour in organisations and jazz when he writes about his frustrations “when people can’t take the next step on their own because they’re afraid of rocking the boat or making waves. If you do this in jazz, you will make bad music” (1998: 561). Therefore, again there is a clear relation between improvisational blocking activity bringing about a ‘bad’ performance which is against the aspiration for the jazz musicians to make good music, more than just maintain the existing melody. Jazz is improvisation because it changes and develops the tune, but I am arguing that this is not always the case in organisations.

In both of these key areas, improvisational theatre and jazz, that serve as the main metaphors in much of the research about organisational improvisation, blocking is seen as something that prevents a good performance and is therefore deemed to be ‘bad’ improvisation. This is because, the goal of both these improvisational art forms is the continuous development of the melody or the story and anything that prevents that occurring should be eliminated through practice and rehearsal. However, as demonstrated by the narrative, and Johnstone’s understanding of improvisation, blocking is still improvising (1981: 94), but just in ways that prevent action. As this is a key area that is not covered by much of the existing literature

about improvisation I want to explore below what it means to our understanding of organisational improvisation to consider blocking action as part of improvisational activity.

### **Improvisation as blocking action**

I have argued above that despite the focus of much of the literature about organisational improvisation focusing on improvisation as processes of change, doing this is missing gestures of improvisation to keep things the same, or in other words, blocking. Salinsky and Frances-White provide the following definition of block in their glossary of terms, “Preventing action from continuing or denying the reality of an offer. Used by anxious improvisers to maintain control or to make audiences laugh, but it kills the story” (2008: 405). Here the word offer is used in a similar way to Bogers and Larsen’s use of the term invitation, an offer is “any new idea brought into an improvised scene” (2008: 406). Whilst Johnstone as well as Salinsky and Frances-White agree that blocking is killing ideas or preventing action, Johnstone associates blocking with inexperienced performers and states that, “blocking is a form of aggression” (1981: 94). Amalgamating these I will define blocking as gestures that prevent the development of ideas, as a way of maintaining control and perpetuating existing patterns which could be seen as a form of aggression.

Reflecting on the narrative above, I describe to Sophie the highly effective strategies that Lewis, Harry and Logan use to prevent change from occurring. In one way or another these have been repeated many times and therefore fall into a recognisable pattern of agreeing that change was needed, but whatever recommendations were presented these would always be rejected for a number of predictable reasons and nothing was ever taken forward. I would say this is an example of blocking, preventing change or the development of new ideas, despite initially appearing open to change. It is a highly effective way for Lewis, Harry and Logan to maintain existing patterns, which probably reduces their fear and anxiety about what might happen; it feels safe and maintains their control. However, I do not think Lewis, Harry and Logan were the only ones illustrating blocking behaviour in the narrative above. Thinking about my initial meeting with Sophie, I approach the scene as a job

interview, I think she is interviewing me to see if I can do the job, if I am up to it. I am very nervous and anxious and my determination to focus and clearly demonstrate my ability, prevented me from loosening up, listening and letting go. As discussed above, I now see this meeting as a missed opportunity to discuss with her what she thought was *really* going on and exactly what help she wanted from me. My anxiety led me to reject her invitation to explore the issues further, I was blocking. Therefore, if improvisation is not only something that happens in processes of change, but also acts of blocking, in attempts to keep things the same, maintain the same patterns, how can we define what improvisation is?

### **What is improvisation?**

I have presented above some of the reasons improvisation has become important to researchers of organisations and practitioners of change, but if improvisation is not solely about change but also about maintaining the status quo, improvisation covers a huge scope. Vera and Crossan do not differentiate between what they call incremental and radical improvisation and examine the whole spectrum of improvisation “defining improvisation occurring in teams as the creative and spontaneous process of trying to achieve an objective in a new way. As a spontaneous process, improvisation is extemporaneous.” (2005: 205). Despite the focus of their study being about improvisation and innovation and therefore implicitly about processes of change, in my view, their definition does not necessarily describe that improvisation will mean that change will occur. As discussed above your objective could be to try to keep things the same and you may have to adopt new ways of doing that in the moment, which would be consistent with thinking about improvisation in this way. Weick (1998) also suggests that improvisation is on a continuum, drawing on the metaphor of jazz and Berliner (1994) he describes the range from interpretation through to improvisation with embellishment and variation in between. Here improvisation is creating something new, radically altering the melody, therefore also synonymous with innovation. Hadida and Tarvainen also agree with Weick, that “improvisation happens to different degrees, and is not a dichotomous on/off activity.” (2014: 10) Defining three degrees of improvisation; minor, bounded and structural and three levels at which these occur, individual, interpersonal and organisational, they provide nine

definitions of different improvisational activity, all associated with change. Whilst I can appreciate that Hadida and Tarvainen are using this typology to try to consolidate existing research and develop ways to move the research beyond the existing jazz and improvisational theatre metaphors, I do not find the way they have done this particularly helpful for the following reasons. The concept of improvisation happening in different ways at different levels of the organisation is a systemic way of thinking about organisations and as described in project one, does not accord with my experience and understanding about organisations. Secondly the idea of individual improvisation as “improvising alone” (ibid: 16) which is different from interpersonal “improvising with one or few others” (ibid) also does not fit with my understanding, because as discussed in project two, Mead’s concept of the generalised other means, even if there is nobody else actually present, there is always a conception of the other enabling and constraining action. Therefore, I would argue that there is no *individual* improvisation there is always a social aspect to this, it is always interpersonal.

In different ways all these writers agree that improvisation can happen to a greater or lesser extent. However, although their definitions may allow it, they do not recognise how improvisational actions may also be maintaining existing patterns and structures, unlike Friis. He states that improvising creates both repetitive actions and novelty, “if you are mainly acting on the basis of your experience, what you have already planned, how you usually do things” (2006: 86), this is likely to result in repetitive actions. On the other hand, if the reliance is more on “spontaneous actions, the possibility for transformation and novelty is greater” (2006: 87). Within this definition there is also the possibility for a spectrum or continuum of outcomes of improvisation to be presented, but rather than starting from minor change it begins with how you usually do things, routine, in other words not changing. However, the basis for Friis presenting this no change position is the difference between repetition and novelty. But what is novelty and how does it occur during improvisation?

## **How does novelty emerge?**

### Novelty as emerging through individual skill within the right culture

In their study of the improvisation and innovative performance in teams, Vera and Crossan, relying heavily on ideas from improvisational theatre, determining that the factors that “enhance a team’s ability to improvise and, ultimately, innovate” (2005: 212) are expertise; quality of teamwork; experimental team culture and real-time information and communication (ibid: 212-215). Training in improvisation “increased not only the incidence, but also the quality of improvisation by improving the individual ability to rely on expertise and teamwork while improvising” (ibid: 217) and senior managers can develop the improvisational skill in individuals and teams by fostering a culture that supports spontaneous and creative processes in firms. Vera and Crossan are arguing that novelty arises through individuals becoming more skilful at improvisation, through training, learning and developing their expertise. Their recommendations about increasing the effectiveness of improvisation in firms is therefore associated with developing these capabilities within individuals and supporting senior managers to create the appropriate experimental culture to foster improvisation. Whilst I would agree that improvisation requires expertise, which they describe as essentially based on previous experience, I find the idea presented here that improvisation is a technique, something that can be taught and organisations can be engineered to encourage, is in opposition to Stacey’s views about improvisation. His explanation, which resonates with my experience and research in project two, is that improvisation is part of the ongoing social process and something that is happening all the time during local interaction (Shaw and Stacey, 2006: 86). For me therefore whilst Vera and Crossan may provide some interesting conclusions about the ability to develop improvisational expertise, I find their perspective to be based within systemic thinking about organisations, as discussed in project one. This means essentially that senior managers can stand outside of the organisation and implement changes to individuals within it that will, in this case, predictably lead to increasing the incidence and effectiveness of improvisation. So if novelty is not the result of training individuals and then creating the right culture to foster it, how else might it emerge?



Novelty as emerging as gestures of provocation

Barrett draws solely on the jazz metaphor stating that “jazz improvisers are interested in creating new musical material, surprising themselves and others with spontaneous, unrehearsed ideas” (1998a: 606). He describes seven characteristics of jazz, the first of which is “provocative competence: interrupting habit patterns” (ibid: 607). This includes experienced musicians making deliberate attempts to avoid using stock phrases, patterns, habits or known solos or “putting themselves in unfamiliar musical situations” (ibid: 609) in order to create novelty and avoid the temptation to repeat what you know you can do well rather than risk failure. Peplowski, a jazz improviser himself, describes a similar phenomenon: “we are always deliberately painting ourselves into corners just in order to get out of them” (1998: 560). There are elements of Barrett and Peplowski’s analysis which describe how jazz improvisers develop their experience and expertise which builds on Vera and Crossan’s points above and I shall return to this. Firstly, however, I want to examine the idea of provocative competence more fully. Barrett describes how provocative competence results in novelty through “creating irregular arrangements that disturb ‘stock phrases’ and comfortable playing, encouraging members to improvise new solutions” (1998a: 610). Bogers and Larsen also see provocation as important “for managers and consultants who work with process of change in innovation... provoking and reacting to the nature and actions of other stakeholders in the process and to the relations and understanding that emerge[s] in the interaction” (2012: 7). Cunha et al when describing subversive improvisations also point to the relationship between provocation and improvisation. “As a form of provocation, improvisation attempts to challenge the organization with the explicit purpose of dis-equilibrating and *un*-balancing what is habitually over-structured and taken-for-granted” (2014: 8). All these authors are pointing at how, what I would call provocative gestures, which could be described as actions that disturb or disrupt existing patterns are creating the potential for novelty to emerge. But how does this fit with my experience?

Returning to the narrative I think there are clear examples where activities I was involved in were gestures of provocation. For example, I think Sophie sending me into Highways in the first place disrupted the taken for granted pattern. I discussed this on several occasions with the internal change team, whose previous attempts at

transforming highways had failed, which was the reason Sophie had asked for my help. However, I now see this as a provocative act on her part, to send me, someone she knew well, a fact everyone knew, into the service to 'sort it out'. I would argue, having seen the degree of autonomy highways usually had, this was very unusual, disruptive and provoked a strong reaction in Lewis, Harry and Logan who had to improvise in order to keep things the same, as discussed above. The second way taken-for-granted patterns were disrupted was by acting in ways that were unexpected, within my role as consultant. Rather than, as Lewis expected me to, sit in headquarters and write plans and reports, I went to the outlying offices and depots and worked directly with managers and staff on the front-line. Although everyone was very welcoming and most were open and honest about the problems and issues, I knew by their reactions to me, this approach was unusual, unexpected and in a way destabilised established patterns.

Thirdly I would argue the way I started to perform my gender was also an act of provocation. Having thought that Lewis's gesture of sitting me with the other women in the admin team was a way of putting me in my place rather than with him and the management team, I think that turning up to board meetings dressed in a particular way, was signalling, "look, I am a woman and I'm not going to go away." When my partner commented on how unusually I had started to dress before going to work, it jolted me into taking a second look at myself. Immediately I recognised that I was doing something quite different, because it was unusual for me to put on a lot of make-up and wear dresses with high heels, in other words to look very feminine. Although after prompting I saw this change in myself, I did not at the time understand why. However, I now see that together with the way I interpreted Lewis' initial response to me, I had also talked with many women across the department about how they felt about working there. Repeatedly they told me men were promoted above them or were better paid in the same roles or if they were in positions above admin workers, they were still treated like them, for example always being asked to take minutes and organise meetings. I had therefore built up in my mind an impression that women were not treated as equals in the department, which as I have already said, angered me. Although as described above, I had not discussed this with any of the senior managers, I see now how having this impression was perhaps unconsciously guiding my action. I was using the board meetings to

provocatively draw attention to a pattern I did not like. To explain further, I think there was part of the gesture that was saying to Lewis, Harry and Logan, I can look like all the other women in the department, I can be feminine **and** be your equal. I am not going to give up and go away, which was what I thought Lewis, Harry and Logan expected me to do; to go off and work with someone else. I anticipated that was what they expected me to do because this was their experience of ‘change people’. The internal change team, who as described above had years of failed attempts to change highways, were always very short of resources. They would withdraw their teams from highways as soon as recommendations from their reports were blocked and move resources somewhere where they could be seen to be delivering change. They saw their role as presenting the suggested improvements, not sticking with highways and seeing it through. Therefore when Lewis, Harry and Logan, blocked my suggestions, I assumed they expected me to do the same and leave. The way the change team had interacted with highways had become another established pattern that I was breaking by just sticking with them and doing what I could to move things along. Returning to the gendered gestures I was making at the board meeting, Lewis, Harry and Logan were not the only attendees at the meetings. Senior managers from across the council and politicians were also there, so perhaps there was also something about performing gender in this way that was attempting to draw attention to the highly ingrained gender patterns, provoking a reaction in order perhaps for others to notice what was going on. These provocative gestures as I have called them, can create novelty by drawing attention to reified patterns. But when these gestures seem to be unconscious or your gestures seem to surprise yourself, how can we understand where they come from? For the moment, sticking with the theme of gender performativity, I want to take some time to expand on the ideas of Judith Butler mentioned above and briefly compare that with other authors who write about gender.

#### Novelty and gender performativity

In her theory of gender performativity referred to above, Butler, rejects the concept of an essential or true self that has innate characteristics, arguing instead that “gender is in no way a stable identity...rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time...instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (1988: 519). It is through this

repetition of gendered gestures, that the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (2006: 191) is created but at the same time permits gender transformation to occur as “the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (1988: 520). Her view is in contrast to other authors who write about gender in a binary way. For example Acker (1990) and Charles (2014) approach the question of sex and gender by presenting each one as a dichotomy, sex is either male or female and gender is either masculine or feminine. Your sex is related to biological characteristics and gender refers to a kind of culturally influenced enactment or characterisation of either masculine or feminine traits. “In this view, one *is* a woman, and being a woman, one *does* womanly things. Clothes, gestures, styles are therefore all merely *expressive* of one’s given gender identity” (Loxley, 2007: 141). Nentwich and Kelan’s (2014) paper demonstrates this point. Within their reviews of other writers they make reference to “what happens if women work in male-dominated fields or men in female-dominated fields?” (ibid: 126) or “the same is not true for masculinity in a feminine context” (ibid: 127). This binary way of thinking about sex and gender has its roots in biological essentialism, that is to say that from your biology certain traits or characteristics are givens, and at its extreme, all women are feminine and therefore behave in feminine ways and vice versa for men. Taking this standpoint as some writers do, causes further confusion between the terms gender and sex, for example within Charles (2014) the term gender and sex are taken as interchangeable and to mean the same thing. This argument is put forward strongly by Glasser and Smith (2008) who say that “in the absence of explicit definitions or statements delimiting the meaning of *gender*, the only meaning available in many texts-both academic and popular-is sex” (ibid: 343).

Continuing with Charles (2014) as an example, she sets out “to explore the ways in which institutional arrangements influence the doing of gender and the practising of politics” (ibid: 368). In her paper she compares workplace cultures within Local and Devolved Government in Wales. Her paper describes when the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) was established, certain institutional arrangements, different to those in existence within Local Government in Wales, were deliberately put in place to support women in politics. She talks about the commitments that were made to gender equality, including family friendly measures that were created and an overall desire to move to a “consensual rather than adversarial way of doing politics,” (ibid:

371) characteristics that she associates with femininity and masculinity respectively. In her paper she concludes that: “there is an attempt to do politics differently and in a way that is more compatible with what are seen as feminine characteristics of cooperation and consensus...women who enter the masculine domain of politics are undeniably challenging the routine ‘doing’ of gender and what is culturally accepted as ‘feminine’”(ibid: 377). However I would challenge this argument, for me it is difficult to accept that all men behave consistently in one way at the NAfW and consistently in another in Local Government and the same for women. The arrangements to make the NAfW more family friendly and gender equal may have changed the way politics is being done in Wales to a more cooperative and consensual approach, or it may have more to do with the fact that as Charles says herself, “Welsh politicians had more that united than divided them” (ibid: 372) anyway. For me, her approach to examining gendered gestures typifies the binary way of seeing gender as inherent, individual and polarised between men and women or masculine and feminine.

This is in opposition to Judith Butler who, as I have described, moves thoughts of gender away from the gender binaries associated with a biological given. I find myself agreeing with this latter approach because it allows for people performing gender in different ways at different times and it is therefore more representative of my experience working in local government. For example, in Highways there appeared to be a clear distinction between the roles men and women fulfilled and the way they dressed and acted. However, I do not believe that staff in Highways would necessarily perform gender in the same way all the time. If they were within a different council or indeed within a different part of this specific council, might they not find themselves acting differently? Surely this could not be the case if gender was individual and innate. Rather I am arguing as Butler would, that history and cultural norms influence how and what they did. In the same way as other patterns I have talked about become reified and therefore appear structural, the gendered gestures in Highways are the same, –they appear rigid and fixed, but are not. You can perform your gender in line with the prevalent culture or out of turn, what Butler calls subversive performances, which to me are the same as provocative gestures. So if gendered gestures are not given individual characteristics how do they arise?

Butler argues that gender is neither constructed or determined, in other words neither a free choice nor already fixed in some way. Rather

the ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms... it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity

(2011: 59)

She goes on to describe that constraint is not a limit to performativity but that “which impels and sustains performativity” (2011: 60), which “cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (ibid). It is this repetition that “enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject” (ibid) rather than “performed *by* a subject” (ibid). Here Butler is arguing that the subject is formed through performative acts, which are repetitious iterations that embody history and cultural norms. As described above, this is tenuously constituted in time and allows the potential for novelty to arise through breaking or subversive repetitions. For me, there is therefore a difference between the way Butler describes these gender ‘improvisations’ to be taking place and the description above from Friis about organisational improvisation, which creates repetitive actions or novelty. Here Butler is arguing that it is repetition that has the potential for creating novelty. However Friis states that spontaneous action is the key to novelty, so let us examine why he might make this claim by returning to Mead and his thoughts about self.

### Novelty as emerging through spontaneity

In project two, I described Mead’s concept of the “generalised other” (1934: 154), that one has the ability to anticipate the responses one’s gestures might evoke in others, the conception of which serves to control the gestures you might make during a “conversation of gestures” (ibid: 42). Mead further elaborated this theory by saying that you can also take the attitude of the other to yourself as part of an “internalized conversation of gestures” (1934: 173). In order to describe his concept where the self is both subject and object he distinguishes between the “I” and the “me” although they cannot be separated in the act and occur simultaneously. “The “I”

is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the “me” is the organized set of attitudes of others which one assumes” (ibid: 175). Mead argues that it is through the “I” that novelty arises as you are surprised by your actions. Which is a further important aspect of the way Mead describes awareness of self; it is only afterwards, on reflection, that the actions of the “I” are assumed into experience, into another “me” creating change of the self. He argues that: “you cannot get the immediate response of the “I” in the process” (ibid: 174) because it is uncertain, it is only afterwards that you become aware of it. Here Mead is arguing that the self is both individual and social at the same time, the “I” and the “me” respectively, which are inseparable. The “I” reacts to gestures of the self, which may on reflection be surprising to oneself, for me this is finding yourself doing something that is to you unexpected. In some ways, returning to the jazz metaphor and Barrett (1998a), I find Mead’s explanation of self resonating with Barrett’s description of musicians “embracing errors as a source of learning” (ibid: 610). Barrett argues that due to the unknown quality of the improvisation, mistakes are made, sometimes as “discrepancies between intention and action” (ibid) however often these are embraced as a new direction: “looking backward the “wrong” notes appear intentional” (ibid). These discrepancies between intention and action seem to me to be similar to the surprise caused by unexpected and surprising gestures one catches oneself doing as described by Mead. However, the other interesting similarity is the retrospective nature of sense-making that Barrett also points to, after the event it is difficult to determine what was intended.

There are a number of examples within this project where I have surprised myself. The first one I would like to draw attention to is my struggle to determine courses of action at certain points in the narrative. There are two instances where I felt conflicted and uncertain about how to proceed and unable to predict the reaction I will get from Lewis, Harry and Logan. The initial instance is when I was trying to think about a way to get their agreement to change something, get something going, knowing that the existing pattern is for them to reject and block any suggested changes. The second is where I presented the backlog of jobs to them at the board meeting. Both times I found it difficult to get a sense of how they would react, what would happen, what their response will be. For me this is quite an unusual occurrence, although as discussed above and in project two you cannot control or

know how others will react to your gestures, you have a sense of it, “the generalized other” (Mead, 1934: 154) or Bourdieu’s “sense of the game” (2004: 50-51), and I normally can anticipate what might happen and think about how to take part in the game. However, this is not the case in Highways and both this not knowing, and the reactions my gestures evoke, surprise me. Perhaps this was because I was ‘out of Lewis, Harry and Logan’s loop’? Sitting me away from them in a separate part of the building and avoiding me, not contacting me, made it impossible for me to build up an understanding and assume their attitudes (Mead, 1934: 175). Therefore I could not anticipate how they would react to my suggestions because I just did not know them well enough to predict this with any certainty. I had not been able to acquire sufficient understanding of the specific social context to enable me to do this and therefore anticipate their reactions towards me and my inability to gauge what they might be, were, in retrospect, a surprise to me. However, I would question if this led to novelty, as Mead would suggest, or just doubt and uncertainty.

Secondly, the gendered gestures I found myself performing at board meetings surprised me, when it was pointed out to me. However, in this situation, I would also contest if this was truly novel. It was novel in the sense that within a work context, it was not normal for me to clothe myself in that way, to wear make-up, high heels and a dress. However, at other times, out of work and with other groups I would dress in this way. In this case, therefore, the novelty, the surprise is repeating something you know but in a different, new context. Therefore I can see from my experience that sometimes your actions are a surprise to you. These actions happen spontaneously, in the moment, but I question even if they do surprise you, is novelty is always the result?

Having examined Friis’ (2006) definition of improvisation consisting of either repetitive or novel actions I have examined in this section a number of ways that different authors talk about novelty arising. Before concluding this project I want to revisit Friis’ understanding following discussion of Mead’s understanding of self. It seems clear to me how much Mead’s understanding of self is influencing Friis’ thoughts about improvisation being either based on your experience, a kind of knowing and therefore leading to repetitive actions or not-knowing, spontaneous action that creates novelty (2006: 86). However, above I have discussed Butler, who



says that novelty emerges from iterative, repetition. Therefore improvisation is not repeating what is already known versus novelty because to some degree you are always repeating what you already know from experience, however this may appear novel if you are performing it out of turn, in a new context.

### **Concluding thoughts about improvisation and innovation**

I began this project asking how we can distinguish between the more radical improvisations proposed by Bogers and Larsen (2012) in processes of innovation, from improvised action that is taking place all the time (Friis, 2006). Describing situations I found myself in with a recent client, I have related situations where I saw the creation, proposition, acceptance and rejection of *invitations* to take spontaneous moves (Bogers and Larsen, 2012: 1). Reviewing other perspectives about organisational improvisation led me to concluding, as Cunha et al (1999) do, that much of the literature is based on metaphors from either jazz or improvisational theatre, with little questioning of the limitations of these metaphors. Using these art forms as a basis for understanding organisational improvisation results in much of the literature describing improvisation as synonymous with change and attempting to find various ways in which individuals can be taught or organisations can be engineered in order to deliver the benefits of improvisation.

However, from my experience I have questioned whether seeing improvisation as change is the full story, rather improvisation also includes acts of blocking, not changing. Looking at the work of Johnstone (1981) about improvisational theatre and Barrett (1998a) and Peplowski (1998) from a jazz perspective, it becomes clear why there is no discussion of improvisation as not changing, because this is seen to deliver either poor performances or jazz. In fact techniques are taught to eliminate blocking gestures from these professions exactly for this reason. I therefore concluded in a similar way to Friis (2006) that improvisation does include keeping things the same, blocking, as well as creating something novel. But that left the question of where does novelty come from? Initially rejecting that improvisation is a quality that can be taught to individuals and agreeing with Stacey that it is “performances of interdependent people” (2006: 138), I examined a number of ways what I call gestures of provocation can be seen to disrupt existing reified patterns

and therefore create the potential for novelty to emerge. Having discussed how performing gender may also be seen as an act of provocation to others, I describe the way Butler understands gender performativity, moving away from gender as innate, located in the individual and within the gender binary, but rather as an improvised identity that is iterated, repetitive and potentially novel at the same time. Finally discussing Mead's (1934) theory of self brings in two important points. Firstly that it is only afterwards, retrospectively that you become aware of changes to the self that arise and secondly that the self can take the subject as an object to itself, the inseparable "me" and the "I" that constitute awareness of the self. Reactions to our own actions can surprise us, which Mead argues gives rise to novelty, however, in my experience whilst there are instances that I have discussed that are a surprise to me, I question if these are always truly novel, or just novel in that context.

If you see improvisation as a social activity as Bogers and Larsen (2012) and Stacey (2006) do, then I challenge Friis' (2006) definition of improvisation. For me, the distinction is not about repetitive actions based on your experience and spontaneous novelty, but rather whether improvisational actions are continuing to construct the existing patterns, falling in line with them, or attempts to shift them. In all cases you are repeating, iterating, as Butler (2011) would argue, acting based on your experience. Rather than as presented earlier in this project and as Hadida and Tarvainen (2014) and Weick (1998) do, which is construct a typology of organisational improvisation, describing different levels, amounts or different objectives that can be obtained which seem highly abstracted from experience, I am arguing that improvisational activity ranges from action to keep things the same (blocking) to highly provocative gestures whose aim is to attempt to change the existing patterns. The difference between one end of this spectrum and the other is the amount of risk you take, the willingness to be seen acting out of turn, making subversive performances, (Butler, 1988: 520) and the extent to which you therefore risk your identity. However, whatever risk you take you can never know if this will be taken up and lead to changes in the patterns of meaning and therefore be innovation (Fonseca, 2002).

In project four I would like to continue my research into processes of improvisation by expanding on the aspects of identity I have started exploring here. I would like to

examine further how the improvisation of gender occurs and whether it is significant as a consultant to pay attention to these relational aspects of identity in change management.

## **Project four: Improvising gendered aspects of identity in change management**

### **Introduction**

In project three, whilst examining processes of improvisation and innovation, I concluded that improvisation is not only about attempts to change organisations as I had previously focused on in my research, but also about attempts to keep things the same, to resist change. I had focused in previous projects on improvisation as primarily about adapting either the implementation of specific change techniques and methodologies or bringing about organisational change with groups whilst reinterpreting these models. The focus of my examination of improvisation had been on my attempts at changing my client's working practices. However, in project three, a deeper examination of what was occurring during processes of improvisation broadened my understanding, that it was not only working practices that were being improvised together, but through relationships with others aspects of identity were also being negotiated as part of the change management work I was undertaking. I began arguing that novelty can emerge during processes of improvisation which are not just about changes to organisational ways of working, but as a social process also affect processes of identity formation and maintenance, specifically with reference to gender. However, in project three I only began to touch on this aspect of improvisation so I would like to adopt a slightly different format in this project and rather than presenting a narrative at the beginning of the project as I have in projects two and three, I would like to start this project as a continuance of project three, and present a narrative of my experience later in this project. Therefore, continuing my argument, I will in this project research gendered aspects of identity at work more fully and how these are related to processes of improvisation in organisational change. I am posing the question about whether it is important as a consultant to understand a more complex relational social picture of what is going on between myself and the client, than I would have paid attention to previously.

As I described briefly in project three, ideas about gender are sometimes simplified to binary oppositions, where biological sex is seen as given and the natural basis for identity. Indeed, until recently, as a result of researching gender and starting to think differently about it, I had often found myself taking that position, and arguing for

women's equality in a binary way. For example advocating a position that all my actions and the actions of other women would be judged as to whether they support, or not, women's equality in the workplace. In other words, I was just polarising my thinking into two categories, men versus women and although I was arguing that men did not automatically have characteristics that women could not match, I was assuming that there were, as given, fundamental differences associated with the sex you are born with. For example, in project three, I described how I look up to Sophie as a role model for women in local government, wanting to emulate that myself, I did not think about whether I could learn from any of the men. What I am pointing to here is that since bringing the ideas of Butler (1988; 2004; 2011) into my project three and rejecting an essentialist viewpoint of gender, a kind of 'doublethink' manifested itself in my thinking. I clearly see myself as a member of the group 'women' and I have strong values about how my conduct at work is seen by others and whether my actions are helping or hindering women's overall struggle for equality at work. However, I also do not see my 'women' group as naturally having certain traits or characteristics, where we all behave and think in similar ways, are good at the same types of work or lead others in the same way and that this is fixed. Rather, I experience a plurality of identities within the group that are continuously improvised. However, I experience some unity of identity associated with the term woman and clearly identify myself as a woman. I therefore continue to agree with others such as Glasser and Smith (2008: 343) finding it difficult to separate the terms gender from sex when thinking about my everyday life and work experiences. Indeed the relevant definitions of the two terms in the Oxford dictionary of English does not clearly separate them. Sex is defined as "either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions" (Stevenson, 2010: 1631), and gender is defined as "the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)" (ibid: 728). Whilst my research in project three briefly presented some differences between these terms, based on my experience and drawing on authors such as Butler (1988; 2004; 2011), Nentwich and Kelan (2014) and Charles (2014), the improvisation of identity, specifically gender was not the main focus of the project. I would therefore like to explore further in this project what gender is, where gendered expectations come from and whether

gendered identities are important in change management and associated processes of improvisation in organisational life today, based on my experience.

### Examining gender expectations



Picture 1: Toilet doors in an local hotel

As the picture above demonstrates, we are surrounded in our everyday lives by cues about gender and its relation to biological sex. When I first saw these signs recently, my initial reaction was to be horrified by what I saw to be a depiction of the stereotypical relationship between biological sex and gendered characteristics: men think about football, women think about shopping. However, following this initial reaction, I then wondered if in fact it was an attempt by the hotel management to create gender neutral toilets, the images representing the people are fairly similar on both doors so I considered whether they were actually having a joke, especially as the hotel is located near a Football Club, which prides itself on its family friendly atmosphere and has many women supporters. However, my partner confirmed there were indeed urinals in the ‘football toilet’ clearly signifying it as the male toilet. For me this example demonstrates a couple of interesting things about how gender is represented in society and how these representations are interpreted by individuals. There is no universal meaning that can be taken up. The way the toilets are signed caused me confusion, my initial reaction is strongly against the inference that women’s main purpose in life is shopping and are excluded from the world of football but then I wonder if this is a joke, as I know women who love football and men that love shopping. I shall return to this point later.

Fausto-Sterling (2012: 7-9) draws on Jeong Mee Yoon's work (pictured below) that contrasts two baby girls surrounded by pink things and a baby boy with blue items to illustrate the how gendered cultural influences surround us. Looking carefully at the photos they point out, "Not only is the intensity of the color scheme striking; noteworthy as well is the preponderance of clothing, dolls and stuffed animals among Lauren and Carolyn's things. This contrasts with the tools, sports equipment, and trucks in Ethan's possession" (ibid). Ascribing this to a social need that has developed since 1920 for adults to be able to tell if a baby is a boy or a girl at first glance, a kind of societal code has developed, blue blanket or clothes denotes a boy and pink items for girls. However, they point out that this has not always been the case; not only was blue associated with girls and pink for boys as these colours had different connotations in a different period of history, but the Victorians dressed all children virtually identically until they were five years old, seemingly unfettered by whether others could tell if their child was a boy or a girl.



Burkitt (2008: 111) points out "whether a child is a boy or a girl, then, shapes our expectations of its behaviour, activities, interests, feelings, emotions, sexuality, self-identity, ways of relating to other people and its future." However, because of these societal pressures to live up to cultural expectations of one's gender

not everyone qualifies as being a man or a woman, or at least not a 'proper' one... When I was growing up in the 1960s I would often hear people saying of someone 'He's a real man', which seemed to indicate a male who was physically

strong and active, athletic (usually mad on football), who was good at practical tasks rather than being overly intellectual, and didn't show too much emotion. As a boy who didn't like football, was interested in music and arts rather than sport, enjoyed doing English at school rather than sciences, and was perceived to be quiet and sensitive, I was pretty sure I didn't qualify as a 'real man'(ibid).

Although gender is not the only aspect of identity that will influence expectations, in my experience, it has certainly had a strong influence on me and I would argue as Burkitt does, everyone. However, it appears that although ideas of what it means to be either a man or a woman can change, there persists ideas and expectations of one sex or the other, despite the evidence that not everyone fits into the categorisations that are made. These expectations about what it means to be either a man or a woman create strong patterns, despite there being no universals, and the evidence shows that patterns change overtime and from one culture to another (MacCormack and Strathern, 1980). However recognisable in everyday experience this way of thinking is, it does not for me sufficiently clarify my understanding of biological sex versus gender, which can be improvised. I am still left with questions about how changes in expectations arise and become a new pattern both in society and more specifically in organisations and why despite strong patterns existing not everyone fits into them, although we often act and talk as though everyone does.

Kessler and McKenna's (1978) ethnomethodological research conducted in North America attempted to understand in what ways gender was categorised into only one of two types, male or female. I want to describe two important conclusions that came from their research. Firstly that when someone saw a picture of another person or met someone for the first time they assumed what sex they were. "As we go about our daily lives, we assume that every human being is either a male or female" (1978: 1). Secondly, their game called "the Ten Question Gender Game" (1978: 142) demonstrated that if you did not know what sex a person was, it is difficult to ascertain this just from questions that were asked about what someone wore, how they acted or their physical characteristics. The game was devised to understand what questions the players would ask about gender, rather than sex, and how questioners would make sense of the answers, which were not describing a real person but were a randomised series of yes and no answers that had to be given in



order. The players are told they can ask any questions about the person apart from if the person is male or female i.e. their sex, and after each answer they have to guess if the person is male or female and explain why they are thinking that. The following is an extract from a game, at question 5 where P is the player and I is the interviewer.

“P: Like does this person wear skirts?

I: Yes.

P: The person *does* wear skirts. Then it’s female I assume because I assume in general when people wear skirts they’re female. The exception being Scottish males perhaps under some conditions, but I assume on the basis of probability that that’s it.”

(1978: 143)

Reading the remaining transcript demonstrates the ambiguity and uncertainty that players struggle with without being able to ask directly if someone is male or female. Indeed Kessler and McKenna point out that “all players were able to make sense out of the apparent inconsistencies in the answers” (ibid: 144). Whilst I recognise the limitations of this experimental game as it is referencing the sex binary by asking the players to describe the gender of the person in only one of two ways, it very effectively demonstrates that when gender descriptions are separated from biological sex then it is difficult to find the words to describe and determine *a* gender as an aspect of someone’s identity. Gendered aspects of identity appear less rigid, more fluid, vague, open to change and transformation than biological sex. Butler argues the same point “when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (2006: 9). I will return to Butler’s ideas shortly but first I want to explore other authors who try to move away from biological sex as the basis of gender, in order to understand the plurality of gendered identities I experience in organisations and understand whether this is relevant to my practice as a consultant.

### **Moving away from biological sex as the basis of gendered identities**

Bourdieu also rejects gender as innate. However, unlike Butler, who argues that gender can be performed in ways that are not congruent with your biological sex, Bourdieu argues that it is the dominant schemes of perception and practice that serve to reinforce the differences between the sexes making it seem natural, rather than an imposed structure (2001: 14-15). However, he argues that although it is not an imposed structure the differences between the sexes are the dominating structures. He therefore sees the basis of all relations between the sexes having developed because the sexes have developed in opposition to each other. For Bourdieu “Genders as sexually characterized habitus” (2001: 3) are always structuring dispositions based on the sex binary. He goes on to argue that power relations between the sexes in Europe are maintained and continually reproduced through three agencies: the family, the church and the education system (ibid: 85). He states therefore that women tend to fare well in roles that are closer to the traditional definition of female activity, such as teaching, social work and paramedical activities, and men the opposite. Whilst Bourdieu argues that gender is not innate, the way he describes how the gendered structure is reproduced through institutional arrangements that maintain the power structure between men and women make it unclear for me how gendered identities that are unrelated to biological sex are constituted in everyday relations and practice, including at work.

West and Zimmerman (1987) draw a similar distinction between male and female as Bourdieu, what they call the sex category, which is not necessarily the biological sex one is born with but whether one identifies and can be identified as male or female. “Not only do we want to know the sex category of those around us...but we presume that others are displaying it for us, in as decisive a fashion as they can.” (1987: 134) However, they argue that sex categorisation and accomplishment of gender are not the same, stating that “doing gender consists of managing ...occasions so that, whatever the particulars the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate” (ibid:135). For me, West and Zimmerman, like Bourdieu, argue against innate gendered characteristics, by stating that sex category does not necessarily dictate the gender one attempts to accomplish, however, unlike Butler there is still a strong emphasis on a binary description of gendered identities.

Many writers point out there is ambiguity within even the biological distinction of only two sexes as male and female (Fausto-Sterling, 2012: 11; West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126; Butler, 2006: 149) describing individuals who are “intersexed: that is, people born with a physiology and biology that are neither clearly male nor female” (Burkitt, 2008: 112). However, the relatively small exceptions to the biological sex categorisation which present a challenge to the biological sex binary, is minute compared with the multitude of gendered identity performances that are in one way or another incongruent with a gender binary. These acts that are dissonant with a gender binary support the assertion that gender identity is improvised which is the focus of this project. I therefore want to return to the ideas of Judith Butler to understand if and how her theory moves gender away from biological sex and a gender binary and supports an argument for the improvisation of identity before then considering its relation to processes of change management in organisations.

As discussed in project three, Butler rejects the idea of gender as essential: “gender is in no way a stable identity...rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time...instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.” (1988: 519) It is through this repetition of gendered gestures, that there is the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (2006: 191). Her theory of the performative is explained as follows: “to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse” (2006: 198). She argues that bodies are the site of signification but this is “*not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*” (ibid) and through that repetition the possibility of improvisation and change can occur, which I discussed in project three. She describes the body “not as a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (2006: 46). Her theory is therefore that there is nothing innate about gender, nothing is given, there is no founding signification of the body, rather that the body’s signification comes about through discourse and as it is continuously repeating its acts, the possibility for reinterpreting and challenging discourse is always present. She presents gender as independent of biological sex, however she maintains a connection between gender and sexuality, by which she means sexual orientation

such as heterosexual, homosexual etc. “Although forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender is nevertheless crucial to maintain” (2011: 182).

Overall, I find Butler’s theory the most convincing, because it describes how the plurality of gendered identities I have experienced could be constituted in ways that are not simplistic and reliant on biological sex for their foundation. However, whilst I agree with much of Butler’s theory - that gender is a performance in some way and socially enabled and constrained, which for her is performed through discourses, as the bodily acts one performs are “never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (1988: 521) - I do not agree with her fully. I find it hard to accept that the body is *only* a surface for signification and *only* materialises through discourses, as for me, this seems to ignore communicative bodily acts that occur all the time between people, as described previously in projects two and three when drawing on the work of Mead (1934). Burkitt also makes a similar point “[in] Butler’s account of the normative ways in which sex is produced ... these regulatory norms exist only in discourse and not in the relations and interactions between social beings” (1999: 96). He goes on “we have to begin to consider the materiality of the body and the way it is lived, and how the lived body is not only a surface for signification, a puppet of discursive norms, but also a body that signifies in relation to other bodies” (ibid: 98).

I would now therefore like to examine ways of thinking about humans and human interaction that move away from both binary structures or discourses as the basis for their formation and recreation, to understand if and how this understanding provides alternative insights about the improvisation of gendered identities which I will then relate to my experience of working in organisations. I will therefore be returning to Stacey (2011) and the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, because this theory focuses on human relationships and bodies interacting, which as described above, I find is missing in Butler’s theory.

## **Complex responsive processes of relating, the relationship between the individual and the social**

Regarded as within critical management studies, complex responsive processes of relating originated through a group of inter-disciplinary management specialists challenging the way systems theory describes organisations and organisational change. Arguing that there is no system outside of us organising ourselves, as discussed in project one, they argue there is nothing more to social life than local human interaction. In other words nothing more is going on in organisations apart from bodies acting and interacting with other bodies. Stacey describes what is meant by this, drawing on analogies from complex adaptive systems theory and the complexity sciences, Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures, Reynolds (1987) Boids simulation and Ray's (1992) Tierra simulation. Because I am challenging Butler's theory of gender due to the fact it overlooks the action of bodies in relation to each other, I am going to further explain complex responsive processes of relating and how it draws on complexity sciences to form theories about human action in organisations.

I will begin by focusing particularly on the work of Reynolds and Ray, and how Stacey compares and contrasts the two experiments. Both are computer simulations based on complex adaptive systems theory and are concerned with iterated patterns of interaction at the micro level between individual agents, represented as computer algorithms. In many ways the simulations are similar, a programmer sets various rules for the agents and boundaries for the experiment and subsequently makes interpretations on the resulting output. The output is made up of patterns formed by the various interactions between the agents. Where the simulations deviate from each other is that in Reynolds' simulation all the agents are homogeneous, the same as each other, whereas in Ray's Tierra simulation they are heterogeneous and differ from each other. In Reynolds simulation the agents are called Boids and are programmed to all follow the same three rules; to stay equidistant from its nearest neighbours; to keep at constant speed and to head towards the centre. The way this simulation takes place is, the actual distance an agent (Boid) is apart from a neighbour is compared to the target and fed back to the Boid in order for it to make the necessary adjustment, moving nearer or further away. Stacey describes that

Reynolds observations as a result of running the experiment, are that the Boids cluster together and form a population-wide pattern called ‘flocking’. Reynolds compares this with the flight patterns of birds, arguing that a few simple rules dictating local interaction between the Boids, creates emergent population-wide patterns without the need for any overarching plan. From this Stacey defines two important concepts, firstly that the Boids are self-organising, which does not mean doing whatever they like because they are constrained to interact locally with each other by the computer algorithms concluding, “self-organisation does not mean that something is organising itself. It means local interaction” (Stacey, 2011: 313). Secondly “emergence means that population-wide patterns arise in local interaction in the complete absence of a blueprint, program or plan for that population-wide pattern” (ibid). Continuing to Ray’s Tierra simulation, because the agents are not the same and are programmed to generate diversity, the population-wide patterns that emerge are different, unlike the Boids simulation, and change spontaneously over the time the simulation is run. Here Stacey emphasises two important factors, that the agents are heterogeneous and their interactions are non-average “the agents are different from each other and the nonlinearity of the iterating interaction can amplify tiny differences into major qualitative changes in population-wide pattern” (ibid: 315). From these observations and drawing on Elias (2000), Stacey uses these insights from the complexity sciences as analogies to human action and interaction as I will now go on to.

Stacey concludes that human communicative action is analogous to individual agents in the simulations in that people demonstrate an “ability to choose within limits” (2011: 317). He goes on to say this supports Elias’ observations about human interdependence and the interplay of individual human intentions and how “societies form individual minds, while being formed by them at the same time” (ibid). Patterns that emerge during the simulations are analogous to population-wide, social patterns that emerge in local interaction in organisations. Lastly that “transformative causality displayed by interaction between heterogeneous entities ... is analogous to ... the paradoxical transformative causality of “forming and being formed by at the same time” (ibid). In other words the individual and the social cannot be separated they are paradoxically present at the same time, however the “ability to choose within limits” (Stacey, 2011: 317) provides for individuality as the population-wide,

generalised patterns are particularised by each human being in each situation as improvisations to the generalisation.

Stacey therefore views organisations as

patterns of interaction between people that are iterated as the present... which produces nothing but further interaction ... Organizations are then understood as processes of human relating, because it is in the simultaneously cooperative-consensual and conflictual-competitive relating between people that everything organizational happens (Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 3).

It is a thoroughly social way of understanding what is happening in organisations, that recognises “We become individuals only through our social interactions with others” (Mowles, 2011: 124). Through the interactions we have with others on a daily basis, as we act with intention, we are formed and being formed together by each other as we act in the present (Stacey, 2011: 300). “Change arises from diversity” (Mowles, 2011: 164) and takes place all the time within local interaction as improvisations to generalised tendencies to act are particularised in each unique context we find ourselves in, which may or may not at the same time create new population-wide patterns as the meaning of the generalisation is changed (Stacey, 2011: 353). For example, in project three the work I did with the council’s Highways team and their contractor changed the meaning of the generalised tendencies they had about how they worked. Initially when I started talking with the teams they did not collaborate well or discuss together the jobs that needed to be done. The generalised tendency was not to talk to each other, but to send emails, which resulted in a large backlog of uncompleted jobs. However, after working with them and getting the teams together, they had regular meetings and discussions about forthcoming work and collaborated together to specify the work. Starting from just one or two people talking together, overtime as this had proven successful, the meaning of the generalised way that the two areas of highways worked together had changed and became more collaborative.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating challenges many strands within the dominant managerialist discourses (referred to in previous projects) about

organisations in several ways. Firstly, it rejects ideas that capabilities and capacities for leadership, or some other desirable trait, are within someone, who is an autonomous individual and can act freely in whatever way he or she likes, by arguing that we are interdependent and therefore what we can do or can not do is enabled and constrained by our interaction with others. Secondly, that the ways humans communicate to each other is not accurately represented by the widely adopted Shannon and Weaver's sender-receiver model (1949). "The model depicts information transfer between two humans as a process dependent on probability factors, that is on the degree to which a message is to be expected or not in a given situation. The model also introduced several key terms...*channel, noise, redundancy, and feedback.*" (Danesi, 2015: 268). Stacey describes that the model is based on "telephony in which one individual formulates an idea in the mind, translates it into language and then sends it to another individual who receives the words and translates them back into the idea" (2011: 81). He goes on to explain that what is described is a model of communication based on cybernetic theory where you could, if there was no noise and the message was translated successfully, transmit meaning from one person to another. Complex responsive processes of relating challenges this model of human communication by drawing on Mead's (1934) theory of a conversation of gestures, where bodies are gesturing and responding to each other (as described in project two) and where what emerges in those interactions can be surprising even to the person themselves (as described in project three). In other words, thought does not come before action but occurs paradoxically at the same time in the act itself. Lastly, the conformity we can all recognise in organisations does not occur through something outside of ourselves, for example, a system imposing a structure upon us as part of a deliberate strategic intent. Rather globalised patterns emerge within local interaction as improvisations in particular contingent situations become amplified and taken up by others.

Despite the principle tenet of complex responsive processes of relating involving the act of bodies gesturing and responding to each other, there is no exploration of the formation and maintenance of gendered or sexual identities in organisations in the theory. The understanding of identity is described "as ongoing habitual responses, emerging in social interaction, which constitute a felt unity of self as embodied histories of mutual responsiveness between the persons" (Stacey, 2011: 217).



However, I am arguing that by not paying attention to these specific aspects of identity and how they are improvised together, we are not taking into consideration the full complexity of interactions taking place in organisations. Many of the change management texts referenced in previous projects (Argyris, 1970; Deming, 1994; Ohno, 1998; Seddon, 2003; Seddon, 2008; Seddon, 2009; Senge, 1990) also make no mention of sexual identities or gendered gestures taking place and therefore influencing what is happening between people in organisations. Burkitt (1999: 90) points out, all bodies are not the same and the image of the body is central to political and social struggles. This makes me question if this is similarly worthy of investigation in power struggles within organisations. Is the body unimportant? Is it taboo in some way to talk about corporeal acts in organisations? What I am pointing to here is that gender and gossip about colleagues having affairs at work, or sleeping with someone to gain advantage, goes on as part of the everyday ordinary experience of organisational life. Are we missing something by not taking these experiences seriously? I find myself agreeing with Acker, that gender and sexuality in organisations have “been obscured through a gender-neutral, asexual discourse” (1990: 140). It is ignored or overlooked by many management literature authors, such as those I described in project one, where the understanding of the organisation that is drawn on is often too abstracted from everyday lived experiences. In order to examine processes of gendered improvisation in organisations further and as an attempt to take into account the bodily relational aspects of gender that Burkitt and I agree are missing in Butler’s theory, I will describe below some local interactions that I have taken part in within a new organisation I have just started working with. In order to take my experience seriously, and building on my research in previous projects which dispute systemic ways of understanding processes of improvisation, I will in my narration focus on the relationships I am forming or bringing with me, examining how these are helping or hindering me to accomplish the organisational changes the Council is expecting me to deliver.

**Narrative: Building new relationships, rekindling old relationships and being explicit about existing relationships.**

The organisation I am now working with comprises two district councils that have recently merged their management structure and services in order to deliver the

necessary savings associated with the Government's austerity programme. I have been asked to support the organisation to continue to find efficiencies through shifting patterns of working and the ways customers access the councils' services onto new digital platforms including a new website, a role that is called public access transformation. An old colleague and a good friend, Amelia, had been working with the organisation for about a year. As she had been working away from home she had been lodging with me and so we frequently discussed the organisation and what was going on, particularly as I already knew some of the people from working in this locality earlier in my career. Some months before I was approached about the job, Amelia had invited me out to dinner with Jessica who is the CEO, Ella who is now the deputy CEO and Lucy an Assistant Director. At the time I was still working with highways and because they also liaised and worked with Lewis, Harry and Logan (described in project three) over dinner we laughed and joked about the difficult job I had to try to change how highways were working. As the conversations went on there were strong themes emerging about how we, as women, could deliver change, something men struggle with, although we did not take time to understand why. Jessica and Ella talked about the change programme they had led across the two councils and how the male members of their team had found leading staff through the organisational merger much more difficult or had avoided it. We had a great evening gossiping, praising ourselves for being pioneers in one way or another in local government and wishing that there were more of us, meaning more women.

Public access transformation, and therefore my new role, falls into Leo's remit as the Assistant Director responsible. I knew him from having worked together in the same organisation sixteen years previously. One of the first things people gossiped to me about was the fact that Leo was in a relationship with Charlotte, who worked in a department I would also have to work closely with. I felt they were warning me about how or who to gossip with as there were connections that might not be immediately obvious as Leo had not disclosed this information to me. This was a situation that I also had to face, as my new partner, who I met at work, was employed by the County Council and would be asked to provide the technological improvements to the new website I was responsible for creating for the organisation. However, rather than keep our connection hidden and a secret, I continuously made deliberate attempts to raise our relationship and be as open as possible about it. In

order to do this I often interrupted what people were about to tell me about the County Council's IT section to divulge I had ties there. Sometimes this did not interrupt the flow of conversation and people continued with what they were going to say, but at other times it did, knowing this information, clearly changed what they felt they wanted to disclose. With those that already knew we were together, I have made jokes about my ability to nag my partner over the dinner table and to some extent circumvent what is seen as the County Council's bureaucratic processes. However, the most surprising reaction I have received when talking about the website and disclosing its my partner who will need to be closely involved, was from Aria in the communications department. Her reaction was that she understood why I was making it clear that my partner was in IT and therefore I was already sleeping him, as this was such an impossible project people might assume I had gone to those lengths to deliver it, which we both found very funny. I am describing that I was by no means a stranger or an unknown character to people in the organisation I was joining. Some people I had known for years, some I knew really well, others I had just met and those I did not know, I knew could find out about me through their connections in the organisation or with the County Council, who I had recently worked with. I am describing that I was aware that people would know me and think about me in different ways, perhaps as someone close to Sophie CEO of the County Council, or the person who's previous assignment had meant nine people had moved on from their jobs, or the woman who worked at two nearby councils over ten years previously, used systems thinking and Roundphase techniques to deliver change then followed her director (a man) across the country to get a big promotion, or any combination of the above and many other stories. Against this background I would now like to describe in detail a couple of experiences of developing new relationships in the first month of working with the organisation. I will focus on the local interaction taking place between us, in order to examine later, these events in detail.

### **International day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia**

The international day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia (IDAHOT) is celebrated each year on 17<sup>th</sup> May. When I arrived at my desk that day, a sticker with the words 'I support IDAHOT' and a picture of a rainbow thumbs up was next my

keyboard. Having had relationships with both men and women, and wanting to be seen to support the eradication of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia, I peeled off the backing and stuck the sticker on my blouse. I was additionally motivated to do this as I felt guilty about the way I had handled a situation the week before when someone had disclosed their sexuality to me.

The previous week I had started to work with Ellie pulling together some data and statistics about the organisations' customers. We were getting on well but then she told me we would have to stop and continue again next week as she needed to go and collect her son from school. Having no other obvious clues about her sexuality, at that moment, the assumption I must have made was that she was heterosexual. As she continued she said she had recently paid for a legal order to make sure her son would be looked after by her partner if anything happened to her. I made a joke saying hopefully that was still cheaper than getting married. She responded saying that her partner did not believe in marriage, **she** was not interested in it. I remember thinking, she, oh Ellie's gay, then feeling very awkward and embarrassed because it was clear that I had made the wrong assumption about her sexuality and I worried about her thinking my reaction meant I was being homophobic in some way. For me the conversation had taken a surprising turn that I had not been prepared for, but felt my reaction to this would be obvious to her and I worried about how she would make sense of it. Before I could talk to Ellie any further about it she rushed off to collect her son.

The next time we spoke was on IDAHOT. She came over to arrange a time we could continue the work we had started. Making pleasantries about the weekend she told me she had been in Bristol at a conference about data. I smiled and told her how much I had loved living there. I enquired about where she had stayed and if the conference was good. Understanding she had stayed near the University I asked her if she had gone clubbing in Frogmore Street. Frogmore Street is a well-known part of Bristol's gay village with several pubs and clubs that display the rainbow flag and are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) friendly. I was aware I was not only asking her a question, but I was also trying to communicate that I was really not in the slightest bit worried that she was a lesbian despite what I perceived to be my poor initial reaction to her disclosure. Of course, I was also potentially disclosing

something about my sexuality but in the open plan office, she did not pick up on this directly. Instead she carried on the conversation and told me that she had really enjoyed going to Frogmore Street, in fact she had met someone there that she had been tempted to 'cross the line' with, but had decided against this, although she still had her phone number. We continued to gossip about this for a while and made arrangements to continue the work we had started the next day.

The next day we completed the data we had been working on together and agreed to pop into town to get lunch together. Whilst walking into town I disclosed to her that I had had relationships with men and women, although I was not normally open about it at work. She talked about her experience of telling everyone at work and the different reactions it evoked. We laughed about the fact that Charlie, who had really fancied her, would not talk to her at all now he knew. Over lunch she told me that she was really unhappy about working for her current boss and said how much she would love to come and work for me, having intermittently worked on public access projects for two years. As I was sitting there, I was wondering, what exactly was being negotiated in this conversation; clearly we both wanted to form a working group but was something more going on. There was certainly a feeling of unity arising from some form of recognition of shared experiences and identity. We have continued to talk about how we might work together as she has vast knowledge of the area I am responsible for that will help me greatly. Subsequently I have negotiated permission from the senior management team to write a proposal for the formation of a transformation team, on the basis that the organisation needs more people like Ellie and I want her to be the first person on my team.

Before I examine this narrative of experience further, I would first like to describe another relational experience of getting to know someone in the early days of working with this new organisation.

### **Presenting progress to a portfolio holder**

I was interrupted from reading my emails by my director, Alexander who appeared at the side of my desk asking if I was free to talk through progress to Jacob, one of the Councillors responsible for public access, later that day. This session was going to

be preceded by a briefing in which Alexander, Leo and I would talk through the strategy for, as Alexander put it, 'dealing with' Jacob. In the pre-meeting it became clear that the concern was trying to stop Jacob getting into too much detail and helping him to understand that his role could not be to make decisions on behalf of the leading Conservative group but rather to socialise ideas for changes or improvements with the group to understand the majority view and support us as officers to then shape strategies that could be agreed and taken forward quickly. Having worked in many local authorities with hundreds of different councillors in my career, neither of these two concerns were much of a surprise to me and I did not worry unduly about them, although I made sure that Alexander and Leo were happy with my approach to explaining progress.

We proceeded into the meeting with Jacob. As it was only my third week and I had not worked at this particular office very much, I was unable to print out my PowerPoint slides so I brought my laptop along to the meeting. As there were only four of us, I was thinking that presenting directly from the screen would not be a problem. The meeting room was very large, dominated by a boardroom table. Because it would have been difficult for Jacob to see the presentation I sat between Alexander and Jacob to present my initial findings and thoughts in the best way I could. As I came to a stop, Jacob started patting me on the back and congratulating me on the work so far. He was explaining that I was not to mind him doing this as he had been doing this with Lily for years. Lily is the director responsible for human resources. I did feel slightly uncomfortable about what he was doing, particularly the potentially coercive way he was manipulating me in this situation that would have made it almost impossible for me to speak out or object if I had wanted to because, if the director of human resources does not mind, why should I? I thought this was a powerful way of silencing me if I had wanted to speak up. However, despite not welcoming his touching, I was at the same time telling myself that this was just another example of some elderly male Councillors who do not really know exactly where the appropriate boundaries are when working with female members of staff. Although I was telling myself this and laughing about how predictable this behaviour was and it would be another good story to gossip about, I was also aware at the same time that I was probably grimacing and raising my eyes, looking a bit exasperated, which Leo could see. I tried to turn my facial expression into more of a

smile, knowing at the same time, it was probably not that convincing. For a moment I wondered if either Leo or Alexander would come to my rescue and say something to discourage Jacob but they did not. Neither did they talk about it with me subsequently and I did not raise it with them. From my experience I would argue that none of us talked more about it because we saw it as acceptable, not drawing attention to the behaviour fitted with this accepted pattern. However, I have not kept totally silent about the situation, I have fed it into the stream of gossip that I have often talked about with other senior women in local government. We frequently laugh about inappropriate male councillor behaviour as we share stories of councillors chasing us around desks, giving us sweets, warning each other of particular characters that are too touchy feely, ones to keep a good distance from or just to avoid if you can. The next time I was in a meeting with Jacob I left an empty chair between us and put my handbag, coat and laptop bag on it as a barrier.

### **Themes emerging from the narrative**

I would now like to draw on these narrative accounts about my experience of working with this new organisation, including these specific encounters that describe local interactions, to look further into improvised gendered aspects of identity at work. I think it is worth at this point looking at my understanding of what was going on during this first month and in what ways these interactions may be also more generally representative of both my actions at this time, and also as a consultant who regularly moves from one organisation to another, in other words, how in general I have learnt to establish myself in new contexts. Initially I will outline the central themes from the narratives and then take time to examine them further. The first theme I would like to draw attention to is the fact that as a new member of the organisation I am consciously and unconsciously building associations as processes of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time as being new, I am recognising that I also have a history, people who have known me or know of me. As a consultant it is fundamentally important to be included, to negotiate your way in, to enable you to do the work you have been asked to do with people in the organisation. In this context my remit is to deliver large-scale changes across the organisation, for this to be successful I need to build alliances across both councils at all levels which I believe I am doing in different ways in the narratives above. Secondly, there is a theme

emerging from these attempts at inclusion of identity formation and how that is occurring between others and myself through communicative processes of gesture and response that inevitably involve improvisations as generalisations are particularised in each specific context. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I see a theme about power relations and their role in sexual behaviour at work and gendered identity formation emerging from these narratives. How and whether I react to Jacob's inappropriate behaviour in front of all the people who have responsibility for maintaining my employment cannot be disconnected. There is a strong power dynamic where you could argue that I am not in a powerful enough position to challenge Jacob's actions without risking my contract in the first month, so I do not. Instead I keep this out of the public sphere and gossip about it in private to those I know will not expose me.

In drawing out these themes I am being consistent with thinking about identity and gendered identity in a relational way, one body to another. I have already drawn on literature that addresses wider issues of gender in society, however I will now draw on literature related to the themes I have described above and also on research specifically relating to sexual behaviour at work in order to understand how other authors deal with the themes I am examining here.

### **Processes of inclusion and exclusion, forming group identities and gossip**

As I have pointed out, there is a theme in the narratives above, about my attempts to claim membership or negotiate my way into various groups through the relationships I am forming. I am using the narrative of my experiences to describe how in these particular cases gendered or sexual identity is used as a way of forming and maintaining a group identity, which includes some and excludes others. In project one, I described Elias and Scotson's work about established and outsider groups. However, I did not go into detail about their theory of group identity, and since it is highly relevant to my explanation of how identity plays a part in social relating, I will do so now. One of the primary ways they describe the established group maintaining its position is through two types of gossip. The first is aimed towards maintaining the superiority of the established group "‘praise gossip’ veering towards idealization" (1994: 105) and the other type is directed towards the outsider group



and used to reinforce their inferior status referred to as “‘blame gossip’ veering towards stereotyped abuse” (ibid). In my narratives above there are several examples of gossip taking place that I would argue is about attempting to form or make claims to be part of one group and distance yourself from another. Firstly, there is the gossip that Jessica, Ella, Lucy, Amelia and I enter into about highways. We use praise gossip about our own abilities. The process of telling our stories to each other forms us as a group through shared experience and we then extend this wider to include all ‘women’ as a group. At the same time we are denigrating the highways team through blame gossip, talking about how they cannot change, they are stuck in their ways, which we extend to all ‘men’ as another group. Secondly, I have described how in the relationship I was forming with Ellie, gossip played a key role in us forming a group identity that celebrated lesbian or bisexual women and that denigrated heterosexuals who could not accept her sexuality. We made fun of Charlie who does not talk to her since finding out she was gay and we laughed about people in the councils who had peculiar reactions when she came out. A clear thread of blame gossip directed towards others in the organisation who ‘do not understand’ about being gay or bisexual emerges and is reinforced by us both. I bring this point out, because I would argue that it was partly because I did not want to be seen by Ellie in this later group, and worried that she would put me in that group after my misunderstanding her attempt to come out to me, that very unusually for me, I disclosed information about my sexuality to someone I hardly knew. By making this disclosure I was also negotiating my way into and forming a strong group with Ellie, which we maintain through blame and praise gossip, affirming which side we are on, together. I am therefore arguing that identity formation is connected to which groups you are associated with, taking part in maintaining their ideology (through gossip) and seen to be part of. Here I am describing how I come to belong in the ‘strong women who can change’ group and the ‘bisexual women’ group, and I maintain my membership in each, through sustaining and partaking in appropriate gossip.

In a similar way to the groups I have described above, gossip played a role in the way I dealt with what happens between Jacob and me. Having worked for years in local government, I almost fully accept that particularly the older male Councillors, will behave in the way Jacob does to me, although I do not like it. Rather than raising it directly as harassing behaviour, I talk about it indirectly, through gossiping

about it, describing it as another example of over familiarity and laugh about it with other women. My story with Jacob then becomes another example to gossip about in a denigrating way, whilst at the same time praising ourselves for being women who can tough it out, not make a fuss and just get on with the job. Not keeping quiet and making a formal complaint would not only potentially risk my job but also membership of this later group of women trying to improve the reputation and profile of women in Local Government. I believe that to this group, formally raising this example, which could be seen as a trivial example, would risk my membership of the group. I am arguing here that in that moment with Jacob the way I found myself improvising, responding was in someway influenced by anticipating how various groups might react to my reaction. As discussed previously, I am not free to do whatever I like, I am constrained by wanting to be included as part of these groups and therefore I have to behave in ways that are consistent with their generalisations so I am not excluded. I need to behave in ways that are consistent with a generalisation about how women in local government deal with inappropriate older councillors' behaviour. However, in doing that, I might find myself behaving inconsistently with generalisations that might be made about another group I am part of. For example the 'bisexual women' group may think any examples of harassing behaviour should be raised formally as a complaint in order to draw attention to it and eventually eradicate it, and yet this is not what I find myself doing. Rather, my improvisation risks my membership of the bisexual women group through not acting consistently with their generalisations but acting in accordance with the former group. In particularising the generalisations of the groups we are a part of, during local interaction between bodies, identity and here gendered identity, because both generalisations are about how 'a woman' should react, is being continuously improvised. At this moment there is a contradiction within me because of different group memberships that enable and constrain me in different ways. This not only creates a contradiction in me but also about what it means to be a woman. I will expand on this point shortly.

Although Elias and Scotson closely define the different types of gossip as attached to different groups of different statuses, I do not want to make a distinction here about the relative statuses of the groups I have been describing. In other words, I am not going to try to determine if one group was the established group and one the outsider

because I do not feel that is applicable to the situations I have been describing. Rather I would use their insight about gossip, to point to how often we are forming groups and therefore identity by entering into praising ourselves on the qualities of the best members of the group and denigrating others based on the behaviour of the worst members of the other group. I would argue that maintaining these is an important way gendered group identities form and are maintained, which is what I would like to describe next.

### **Gendered group identities**

I find the narrative about Jessica, Ella, Amelia, Lucy and I gossiping and forming a strong 'woman group' above, and Ava and I working closely together in project three, as typical of many examples of my experience, where I have participated in groupings that have an all female status, or female camaraderie and are proud of it. The next question to ask is do men do the same? I cannot speak from personal experience of being a member of an all male group, but returning to the Highways group in project three Lewis, Harry, Logan and the other male Highways managers, were similarly proud of their all male group and found a kind of unity based on that. Again this has a cultural and historical basis, as I remember someone in Highways telling me about the 'Bright Young Men' programme which had been a kind of talent management programme, a way of developing their own, supporting junior engineers to become managers. In Highways, for many roles it is necessary to be a qualified civil engineer. In the UK 94% of engineers who have this qualification are men (Women's Engineering Society, 2016), consequently, most of the staff including management are men. Fincham and Rhodes also note similar patterns of female employment in the UK (1992: 294) arguing that whether as a result of discrimination, or through women's choices, they often have part-time positions and are less well represented in higher levels of management. In other words the all male management group in Highways did not form as a way of excluding women, it formed from qualified people who could do the job. The gender bias in those qualified to do the job has been clearly towards men, although there are now 6% of engineers who are women that would be able to compete for management positions. Therefore culturally and historically in this specific context, the identity of manager has become very closely, almost synonymously connected with being male. In

project three I explain how I attempt to improvise my way in to a management position as a woman in this context and find myself particularising the groups generalisations in ways that surprise myself.

Returning to the connection with football and male identity discussed at the very beginning of this project, within Roundphase Consulting described in project two some men used football as a way to form all male groups. It was a common occurrence for some of them to play football together, which women were not invited to take part in. It was also common, as it is in many organisations, for some men to talk about football, often perceived to be an activity that women will not take part in, although I always know enough to do so. However, I have also experienced conversations in organisations between men that I cannot improvise my way into. When I was working in the financial services industry, men would often talk together about wristwatches. These watches were a kind of status symbol and one of my clients, Lucas, would often discuss with other male peers or superiors new watches he was adding to his collection, which already numbered fourteen, discussing why he had bought one particular watch and not another. I found this very excluding. Unlike conversations about football which one can join into by knowing and learning enough about football to ask questions and intelligently enquire, as a woman I was not going to start buying and wearing a man's watch in order to be able to join in. Unlike football, conversations concerning men's wristwatches have more of an inherently gendered association that includes men and excludes women because the item being discussed is an exclusively male fashion item. The same was also true of the women in the organisation who ranked status based on designer handbags.

Returning to the narrative about IDAHOT, every member of staff received a rainbow thumbs-up sticker and was invited to show their support for the eradication of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. However, not everyone did wear their sticker. Two groups formed around this symbol, the sticker wearing group and the non-sticker wearing group, including some and excluding others. The ambiguity of the thumbs-up sticker, which could have been not only a symbol of sexuality, but a way of showing your support for a cause, means it is difficult to exactly name what was going on and what the groups actually represented. However, based on my experience, I would strongly suggest that they were worn mainly by people who

identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. For me these conversational or group patterns that surround thumbs-up stickers, men's wristwatches or designer handbags are a further step away from topics that one might assume to be gendered but do not necessarily exclude the other, like football. But there are examples of groups that have gone even further creating very clear distinctions through language in order to include some and exclude others in order to closely guard membership and stay safe.

Green (1997) describes how male homosexuals, particularly in London, adopted Polari, a pidgin language which is thought to have originated from sailors and also associated with the stage, to talk together without others understanding exactly what they were saying. In other words they adopted a language designed to include homosexuals and exclude others. Together with camp affectations, a strong group identity was formed and reinforced through the use of Polari, particularly through the 1940s to the 1960s during a time when homosexuality was illegal, enabling homosexuals to talk openly to each other in ways that were not understood to any outsiders listening or observing.

“it would seem that the pre-Gay Liberation male homosexual world, like any ‘secret’ sub-group of society, both required and desired some form of ‘secret’ language, working simultaneously to affirm the secret unity of the outcast, and by ‘speaking in tongues’ to hide from the larger, hostile world.”

(Green, 1997: 129)

Clearly there are differences in the relative safety and status of the groups I have been discussing. Homosexuality was illegal at the time when Polari was in use whereas executive women talking about designer handbags, whilst excluding for men, does not have the same relative power of inclusion and exclusion. However, when I was talking to Ellie, I was doing something similar, by referring to Frogmore Street. I was saying something that also had some further meaning for a group we both identified with. What I am drawing attention to here is a common pattern; whether the conversation is in a secret language designed to exclude others, uses words that also might signify something about common group membership or is about handbags, wristwatches or football, the same effect is taking place. Groups are forming and maintaining their identity through local interaction from which emerge

global patterns in language or which are associated with dress or accessories that become symbols signifying group membership as they are taken up by the individual members of the group. The group and the individual are paradoxically linked and as discussed above, forming and being formed at the same time, in Elias' words "There is no I-identity without a we-identity" (1991: 184). Stacey (2005) describes how through these communicative patterns through gesture and response, we are at the same time maintaining the group's dominant discourses or generalisations, as discussed above. However, he also argues that this has a further function, which is to sustain current power relations between members of the group and between one group and another. Having examined the first two themes from the narratives concerning processes of inclusion and its relation to identity formation, I would now like to turn to the last theme, power relations.

### **Gendered identity in organisations and power relations**

In project two I drew on Foucault's thinking about power and its disciplinary affect through internalisation in organisations. Continuing to take a relational view of power, as opposed to seeing power as something one person has and another does not, perhaps in relation to their position in the organisation, I would like to examine the thinking of Elias (1978: 71-103) and his understanding of power, groups and games in order to understand the connection between gendered groups and identities that have already been discussed and power relations.

Elias argues that power is present in all human relationships, not that one person has it and another does not, but rather that it is a "structural characteristic...of *all* human relationships" (1978: 74). He argues that rather than examining power from the perspective of the individual, the interdependent nature of human relationships gives rise to figurations of power and is it these that should be studied. In order to illustrate this, he describes a number of game models where individuals or groups are in different relations to each other in order to explain how these relations change as the balance of power between the individuals or groups changes. He argues it is not possible to understand the action of one individual or group without seeing them in relation to the other.

For example, talking about a two player game between A and B he writes

The more the differential between A's and B's strength decreases, the less power either player have to force a particular tactic on the other. Both players will have correspondingly less chance to control the changing figuration of the game; and the less dependent will be the changing figuration of the game on the aims and plans for the course of the game which each player has formed by himself (1978: 82).

It is not necessary here to describe in detail all the game models and associated power figurations that Elias examines but rather to take a couple of examples that have already been discussed and consider aspects of power in the way Elias describes them from an interdependent point of view.

Firstly, I would like to look at power relations within a group and return to the discussion above about male wristwatches in the financial services sector. There is no doubt as I have already said, conversations about this male fashion item as a dominant discourse of the group, served to maintain a strong all male group that was excluding to women. However, I would now go on to say the conversations I observed that took place between the men about wristwatches were ways of negotiating their position in the power hierarchy. Who had the best watches, the most watches or the most expensive watches were all ways in which the men within the group were negotiating their status with each other. The watches had become a metaphor for how much money someone earned or how large a bonus someone had recently received and had therefore enabled this to be talked about and disclosed. The group cut across organisational hierarchy and was therefore a way for those with less formal status in the organisation to improve their status in the eyes of others, especially superiors, by displaying and talking about their success by the accessories on their wrist.

In a very similar way when I went to dinner with Jessica, Ella, Lucy and Amelia although I did not know there would be a job opening, I knew my assignment with Highways would not last forever and I saw dinner as an opportunity to improve my status, become included in their senior management group which would improve my chances of getting a job should one be advertised. As a group we were negotiating

our status by telling each other stories about who could deliver the most successful change. I took time to talk about how I had delivered change, making sure this was in ways that would help me to be seen to be part of the group and therefore be successful at securing work with the Council if advertised.

Lastly I would like to return to the narrative about Ellie and myself. Whilst from the viewpoint of the rest of the people in the organisation we were collaborating on a project, as we had been asked to do, what was also emerging in our interactions was sharing of intimate stories and details about our sexuality. This as described above led to us forming a group, I would argue a far stronger group than others in the organisation would at first have recognised, although we could see this and discussed together a way of using our combined influence to gain advantage. Although latterly I did question whether what was emerging between us had any sexual intentions our interaction did not start out with that in mind. Ellie wanted to move away from her current manager and I wanted to work with Ellie because she had background knowledge of the subject I had been asked to consult on. In the power relationship between us neither dominated, I needed her almost as much as she needed me and both of us wanted to work together so it was not really a question of who between us had the ability to dictate the game over each other, but over others in the organisation in order to get what we both wanted. Two people attempting to change things in the organisation to the same aims but working together covertly would improve our chances of getting what we wanted as the power figuration has changed. However, at the same time as collaborating over ways to work together in the future I was also aware that we might also be negotiating whether to be more intimate with each other. A potentially sexual intention had emerged in our interaction, a point I will return to.

As considered in this project, aside from the formal organisational hierarchy, there are many groups that form and are acting in relation to others. Some have a gendered nature to them, for example the sticker wearing group on IDAHOT or the wristwatch wearing men's group. The actions of these groups can only be understood when seen in relation to others in the organisation that they are interdependent with. Whilst at the same time within each group there are power struggles and ongoing negotiation of status. As a change management consultant I am caught up in these as much as anyone else in the organisation, as I find ways to



be included in groups. However, being part of groups creates your gendered identity in the organisation whilst at the same time the improvisations you find yourself making are maintaining and creating the generalised gendered identity of the group, defining for example what it means to be a bisexual women in the organisation. Before I summarise the project and draw my final conclusions I would like to briefly draw out one final aspect from my narrative between Ellie and me about sexual behaviour at work.

### **Sexual behaviour in organisations**

As already discussed, there is very little research about sexual behaviour in organisations, especially non-harassing gestures (Berdahl and Aquino, 2009: 34; Powell and Foley, 1998). However, this is in contrast with my experience of working in organisations as described above, where myself and others have met sexual partners at work or had interactions with others of a sexual nature. This point is supported by Biggs et al (2012: 272). Monro reflects that this is not just heterosexual in nature stating “recent statutory and policy changes have raised the profile of lesbian, gay and bisexual equality initiatives in the local government arena” (2007: 1), something demonstrated in the narrative above by the way people in the councils were celebrating IDAHOT.

However, research in this area is largely concerned with polarising whether sexual behaviour at work is a good or a bad thing and its effects on job satisfaction and turnover intentions or other similar factors in order to, in one way or another, inform human resources policy making. For example, Salvaggio (2011) et al studied co-worker reactions to observing sexual behaviour at work in the USA, collecting data via an online survey. Their findings supported previous findings of Berdahl and Aquino (2009) that “sexual behaviour at work was not associated with positive outcomes (i.e. higher job satisfaction, or lower turnover intentions)” (2011: 616). They conclude that the implications for Human Resource managers would be “that even seemingly innocent expressions of sexuality should be banned in the workplace [although it would be] impractical to banish romantic relationships altogether, or tightly regulate consensual employee behaviour” (ibid: 617).

Biggs et al produced similar findings in their research into romantic relationships in organisational settings in both the USA and UK, which used an interview-based methodology. They found no overall differences between the UK and USA and similarities with previous research that workplace romances were seen as negative (2012: 276) or that they should be separated from the work in order to maintain professionalism (ibid: 277). I find their conclusions inconsistent because despite finding that their study's participants agreed the workplace is one of the best places to meet a partner, would prioritise a relationship over their job and therefore that individuals would not want an organisation to ban workplace romances, they conclude that there should be policies in place to reduce the negative impact they have on work. Workplace romances should be discouraged due to "workplace distress including gossip, perceived or real favouritism, distraction, and discomfort of employees" (ibid: 281).

However, I would argue that whether a pejorative view of this behaviour is taken or not, from my experience everywhere I have worked people are in relationships, flirting or making sexual advances to one another. Some people are in sexual relationships with each other, whether they are open about it or not, at work people have partners, are married or civil partners or having affairs. Whilst I can understand the desire to understand the impact this has on others or how your reputation might be tarnished, I find it hard to accept the subsequent conclusions that institutional arrangements should or could be put in place to reduce or prevent this from taking place. I argue this because I think the assumptions behind the research about sexual behaviour in the workplace in this section are quite different to those examined in the section above about the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, which I shall go on now to explain.

Many of the researchers mentioned above, who have studied workplace romance or sexual behaviour at work make assumptions that in human interaction thought comes before action. Taking for granted that as autonomous individuals we are independent and can choose in advance of any given situation how we will behave and control what will happen, leads to conclusions about the possibility of ways to control individuals through Human Resource policies that would stop people from embarking on sexual behaviour at work. They are also making assumptions about

the model of communication between people, assuming communication to follow the sender-receiver model referred to above. This is demonstrated most clearly by Berdahl and Aquino (2009: 36) who, for example, write about the sex of the receiver and sex of actor. In other words they clearly separate the two individuals taking part in the interaction and view their behaviour as one person sending a communication, in this instance a sexual one, to another person who then receives this and makes sense of it. Thinking of communication in this way leads them to make assumptions that not only could you control exactly what you are doing, as described above, you could know and anticipate how your gestures would be taken up and therefore improve how the receiver would view and understand your actions. In other words, if you accept the sender-receiver model, you might assume that unintended and distressing sexual behaviour could be avoided by training individuals to send messages in a more controlled way. Drawing on my experience by returning to the narrative above, I would argue that what unfolded in both the cases described in detail was not predictable or completely in one person's control or the other, we were improvising together. As discussed above in relation to the power figuration between us, what emerged between Ellie and I, which had some sexual aspect, did not feel like the intention of either of us but rather emerged in spoken and unspoken gestures that occurred between us, in that situation at that moment. Clearly we both can then make choices about how to respond and Human Resource policies and general expectations about how to behave at work would clearly influence that response. However, I would argue that they cannot universally influence in advance the emergent meaning from our conversations of gestures, in this case the unpredictable, relational understanding that we were forming together, was also sexual. Turning now to the interaction between myself and Jacob I have already argued that it might have been viewed by others, in a completely different way, seeing it as harmful and harassing and that I should have complained about it. Rather than a linear sender-receiver model of communication as discussed above and assumed in the research discussed above, I am arguing for a different understanding of communicative gestures based on the thinking of Mead (1934) (and as discussed in project two and project three) where the meaning of person A's gesture is only understood when person B responds and that A and B's actions are not separated, in the whole communicative act meaning emerges.

This leads to another problem I have with the research on romantic or sexualised behaviour and relationships in the workplace that I have reviewed above. Much of it is survey based, asking standard questions either via online questionnaire or an interview (Salvaggio, Hopper and Packell, 2011; Biggs, Matthewman and Fultz, 2012), and therefore I would question if the researchers are sufficiently capturing the actual complexity of the lived experience of the individuals involved. Where the people in the sample have not been involved in sexual behaviour at work, questions are asked about how they view such behaviour, although no account of the relationship the interviewee has with the people they are talking about is analysed and neither are emotions that could be evoked, such as jealousy or rivalry, taken into consideration. Where the research does include the individuals involved (Berdahl and Aquino, 2009), the way the experience is described is highly abstracted and generalised, asking for participants to rate the experience on a numerical scale. Overall I find in this research there is little explanation of precisely what behaviour was actually taking place or the relationship of the respondents to each other or to those observing the behaviour. This research is focused on understanding ways for organisations to control sexual behaviour or romantic relationships at work, assuming it to be a bad thing for an organisation. This is opposed to my argument, that humans as sexual beings, will inevitably express that to some degree at work.

This desire to reduce sexual behaviour in the workplace is reflected by Schultz (2003), in her study on the impact of the introduction of sexual harassment law to the way organisations view sexualised behaviour stating that in America there is an “ethic of workplace asexuality” (ibid) and a strong drive to desexualise the workplace a point already mentioned by Acker (1990) above and supported by Burrell’s analysis. In his paper Burrell (1984: 97-119) examines the desexualisation of organisations that has taken place over a very long historical period. Taking a Foucauldian view ‘where there is power there is resistance’ he argues that organisational processes of desexualisation have always resulted in resistance from those in organisations and the present time is no different, although he states that very little is known about sexual activity that takes place in contemporary organisations. However, he argues that it is not just resistance to power but also that some sexual activity in organisations involves power *and* control, for example harassment and violence. He concludes that sexuality is complex, it is difficult to

separate control from resistance and that “most sex acts involve both dimensions in a dialectical interrelationship” (1984: 113)

This raises another important point: authors such as Salvaggio (2011), Biggs et al (2012) and Berdahl and Aquino (2009) discussed above do not take power figurations into consideration in their analysis or discussion about what is going on between the people in the organisations. Yet, the negative aspects about sexual behaviour at work described in these papers are all connected to power. Why do others view with suspicion relationships at work? I would argue it is because of their interrelatedness with power figurations. Surely favouritism is giving someone preference over another, a change to the power relations and gaining favour might improve a person or a group’s chances of controlling the game (returning to Elias). If someone is in a close relationship with a boss, they may have access to information or knowledge that they can use to their advantage. On the other hand spreading rumours and gossiping about people having extra marital affairs maybe attempts to reduce their status or likelihood of getting a promotion, as their behaviour is seen as unprofessional. Returning to the narrative and Aria’s comment about people assuming I might have slept with someone in order to deliver the difficult project, she is implying I might have ‘prostituted’ myself in order to get him to do what I needed him to, used sex to improve my status in the organisation by completing the assignment. Any consensual sexual relationship is threatening to other groups because it creates such a strong close bond. I think it is inevitable others would see it as negative because it can have such a profound effect on one’s ability to control the game and get what you want if you have two players discussing what is going on then agreeing and adopting the same strategy. On the other hand I do not want to overlook the point that sexually intimidating behaviour, as described in my narrative with Jacob, is an effective way of maintaining power relations, securing one person in a dominant position over the other.

### **Concluding thoughts about improvisation and gendered identity**

I set out in this project to understand whether, as a management consultant working with organisations to implement changes to their existing ways of working it is important to understand a more complex relational picture about what is going on

between myself and the client particularly with reference to gendered aspects of identity that I argued in project three could be improvised. I will therefore summarise the main points of my argument from this project and draw some conclusions before presenting the final chapter to my thesis, a synoptic analysis of all the research I have presented.

I agree with Kessler and McKenna (1978) and West and Zimmerman (1987) that when you meet someone you do make assumptions about what sex they are from their physical appearance and other clues they give you. I would argue also, returning to the narrative, you make assumptions about their sexuality, as I did incorrectly at first with Ellie. I am not saying that the biological sex you are dictates gender identity, but at the same time I find I cannot argue that they are totally unrelated; the physicality of the body is important, although not in a linear and simplistic way. Our sexed bodies are such a fundamental element of identity, dictating the language we use to address each other – him or her, he or she – in order to maintain any relationship with another you must allocate them to one category or another. However, I am not arguing therefore that in organisations there is a similarly binary definition of gendered identity; indeed it was my experience of noticing the plurality of gendered identities that were being improvised that aroused my curiosity sufficiently to research this project.

Drawing from Mead's (1934) theory of communication, as one sexed body is gesturing, the other is at the same time responding, to the other in what Stacey calls local interaction (2011: 323) which paradoxically forms both an I-identity, self and a we-identity, the group at the same time. Global, generalised group patterns emerge from the local interaction of gestures and responses. I would argue that two of the generalised patterns that emerge and are present in organisations are the generalised tendencies to act as a man and the generalisations associated with being a women, although there will be many others. There maybe generalisations about what it means to be a man in the highways department, as discussed above, or even more specifically a man in the management team of highways, and these generalised patterns are emerging from our local interactions. These patterns can change both in organisations and in society through improvisations that take place when in each unique context, the generalised patterns are particularised. The improvisations may

maintain existing patterns or change them, either way the activity of particularising the general patterns about gender are improvisations. I am arguing here that gender is an aspect of identity that emerges in local interaction as one sexed body gestures and responds to another. In this act, we are forming patterns and being formed by the global patterns that are created through ongoing local interaction between bodies. I would therefore argue that bodies signifying to each other is important when thinking about the construction of gender identities, because it is these acts that create identities associated with the groups we find ourselves in through a transformative teleology which paradoxically produces stability and instability at the same time. Viewed this way, there is no static typology of gender in organisations outside of human interaction, acting on or influencing it. Recognisable patterns are more fluid, nuanced and are emerging through the social process as our sexed bodies with their unique embodied histories act and interact together.

This project has examined groups that form and are present in organisations aside from the formal organisational hierarchy, some of which have a gendered nature to them. Although I would have been aware of different groups in the organisation previously, I would not have taken much notice of them as part of my practice. Rather, I would have concentrated my efforts at building relationships with only the immediate team I worked with and a very few senior managers who I would need to support the changes I was leading. However, examining organisations from a complex responsive processes viewpoint and understanding more about power relations, I have come to understand that there is not only one power structure in an organisation, represented by the formal organisational hierarchy. Although that is an important structure and the people within it have an ability to use surveillance and disciplinary power to control, as discussed in project two, I now understand that there are also many other groups operating within organisations who are interdependently struggling to control the game and get what they want. This also includes, although often hidden, people in the organisation in sexual relationships with each other or who form groups through shared sexuality identification.

My change management practice in this organisation is very different to assignments described in project one and two, as I have built relationships across the organisation and become included in many different groups. However, this has complex

consequences, as I find a sexual intention emerging as I form a close working relationship with Ellie and internal conflict as I react to Jacob's actions because the more groups I am accepted in, the greater number of generalisations that I have to do justice to in order to continue to be included in the groups. These improvisations as the generalisations are particularised affect not only working practices but at the same time identity. However, being part of many different groups increases my chances to deliver the changes I am being asked to by improving my power chances, giving me a better insight into the organisational game that is playing out. Elias describes a particular power figuration if an individual is capable of maintaining a balance between interdependent but rival groups. "In this way he reaches a position which gives him greater power chances than any other individual in the figuration" (1978: 90). I would question whether my approach to increasing the number of groups I am included in gives me greater power chances than *any* other individual in the organisation. However, I believe it does improve my ability to influence and therefore change generalisations, which is what I am being paid to do, through ongoing processes of improvised particularisation, regardless of whether those generalisations are 'give good customer service' or 'senior women in management'.



## **Synopsis**

New experiences, and new understanding of old experiences, bring with them a new perspective not only on our own lives – our present, as well as our pasts – but on the way in which we make sense of the lives of others.

(Andrews, 2013: 205)

In this final chapter of my thesis I draw together the research that I have already presented in the four projects and outline my central arguments, my contribution to knowledge and practice and describe the method I have used as well as reflect on the ethical considerations of undertaking my research.

What follows is not just a summary of the research that has already been put forward, but both a critical review and a rethinking or re-examination of the projects where appropriate. As discussed in the introduction, I have presented the projects in the previous chapters as they were originally written. I have not redrafted them as my thinking about processes of improvisation in change management has developed or changed as my research progressed. However, as it is now four years since I started writing project one, I do want to critique and build on my earlier research from my current standpoint in order to make my arguments clear. By taking this approach, which is also a requirement of my doctoral course, I can demonstrate the movement of my thought and practice with respect to organisational improvisation that my research has enabled. I would now very briefly like to outline what I understand this movement to be thus far through the thesis before reusing my projects to draw my final conclusions and arguments together.

At the start of my enquiry in project one I hardly recognised any of what was taking place as improvisational. This was due to my belief that organisational change was a separate activity from day to day work, could be controlled by consultants like myself and took place through a series of logical steps. From this perspective I saw improvisational activity as the necessary small deviations from the standard procedures required when unplanned or unique circumstances arose, but I did not recognise this as happening very frequently. However, I had doubts about this understanding. Continuing my research focussed on what I started to understand as

inconsistencies between the organisational theories I had learnt and my experience, in project two I explored a situation where it seemed necessary to be innovative due to it being a new area of work for the consultancy, where standard procedures would have to be significantly adapted. My research demonstrated that innovations did not arise in a logical planned way through my actions and models, systems and processes but as a result of the ongoing relational communication between people (Mead, 1934) in which power enables and constrains (Foucault, 1977) what happens and what is talked about openly (Scott, 1990). Moving towards this relational understanding of change involving power accorded with my experience. However, I then had doubts about how to explain the difference between improvisation and innovation, which subsequently became the subject of project three. By this time, I had stopped using any standard procedures and thought carefully about what was taking place between others and myself at work. Examining these relationships and how they influenced and affected not just how the work was undertaken but also the people involved led me to narrate a complex picture in project three where improvisations occurred not just to change work processes but also maintain the status quo. This seemed to be often overlooked in the literature about organisational improvisation. This was not the only gap; project three also identified that improvisation at work also seemed to involve aspects of identity such as gender. Bringing in Judith Butler's (2006) argument that gender is improvised through iterative performances seemed to explain how this might occur, but left me curious to understand more about how aspects of identity are improvised at work and whether this was important for me to understand as a consultant for my practice. I took this as central to my enquiry in project four, where I concluded that gendered and sexual aspects of identity are improvised at work, and those demonstrations of group membership are bound up with how or whether change occurs. I have argued that gender and sexuality, as aspects of identity, are also improvised in work places as part of everyday working life, although this is often not recognised in mainstream organisational change management literature. For me, conventional approaches to organisational change, which underplay analysis of gendered and sexual relations at work, demonstrate the ever-present but sometimes hidden nature of organisational improvisation. In other words, examining gender and sexuality at work, not as separate, but as part of the ordinary experience of work provides a new way to understand organisational improvisation. Therefore, in this synopsis I will continue

to explore gendered and sexual aspects of organisational life especially where these have not previously been examined as a way to understand and explain organisational improvisation more generally.

As I have progressed through my projects and my research, each time examining my experience of what is happening at work, I have moved from understanding improvisation as an individual's deliberate minor adaptations to standard work procedures to a more social explanation of improvisation. I conceive of it as taking place all the time, associated with wider aspects of identity as well as working methods, emerging through bodily communication between people who are in relations of power endeavouring to understand and control the organisational game that is taking place.

In order to conclude my research I will revisit each project, present the central themes that support my arguments and then provide a reinterpretation from my current perspective and understanding. In this way I am using my projects individually and collectively, in their original form and from a new perspective, to build my arguments and thoroughly examine my practice. By understanding the changes in my practice from project one through to four, as briefly outlined above, it will become clear how differently I have come to see my work and how I approach consulting; and it is from this understanding that I will make my contribution to practice. Alongside making these distinctions I will draw out my contribution to knowledge, including a complex responsive processes of relating perspective on improvisation in change management, explaining how improvisation is relational and takes place between people all the time as shifts to power relations, meaning and identity.

I will continue this chapter by revisiting my previous four projects summarising key points and elucidating previously unexplored perspectives, particularly gendered and sexual aspects of the work that were overlooked when the projects were first presented. At that time these aspects of working life appeared to me unimportant, peripheral and separate to understanding my work, improvisational consulting practices, whereas I will below, argue that they are of central importance.

### **Revisiting project one: Moving beyond improvisation as the interaction of unsexed and ungended bodies**

The focus of project one as originally written was both an exploration of the consultancy and consulting methods I was expected to use in my work with clients and an explanation of how the changes I was involved in arose. However, as the first project in my thesis it also contained an explanation of how I came to think and practice which involved writing about my history, major educational influences and the culture I came from. At the start of my research I was disillusioned with the consulting techniques I was required to use, which never seemed to deliver the predictable changes promised, no matter how closely I and others followed the steps as prescribed. But despite this, changes within the client's working practices were occurring so I was perplexed as to how these were happening, if it was not as a direct result of the techniques.

#### Organisations are not systems and do not change predictably

Scrutinising my practice as a consultant, together with the change management models promulgated, led me to understand in project one why I had come to question the claims of the management consultancy about the universal nature of the techniques. The consultancy models and methods were based on assumptions that organisations are systems. It is an important part of my argument that conceiving of organisations in this way obviates understanding of improvisational changes which are unplanned, unknown and arise as a result of the gesture and response of bodies interacting as explained later in project four. I will therefore briefly summarise why I am rejecting this way of understanding organisations despite its widespread acceptance.

The systemic ways of thinking about organisations are primarily based on the work that von Bertalanffy undertook. He was a biologist who argued for examining organisms as wholes. Later he defined open and closed systems, before suggesting that the behaviour observed in open systems in biology could be seen in other domains, which he called General Systems Theory (1968). Whilst organisational change authors have interpreted von Bertalanffy's model and subsequent revisions

differently, it is not the purpose of this research to elaborate and provide a comprehensive review of each of these and the development of the systems thinking discourse. Rather I intend to broadly reflect the understanding of organisational change that proliferates if this way of viewing organisations is taken, which are:

1. Organisations *are* systems.
2. Organisations have a clear hierarchy, starting with individuals who make up teams that comprise departments that together make up the (whole) organisation. Individuals are thought of as autonomous and often assumed to be homogenous.
3. Managers can step outside their organisation to understand it as a system and make predictable changes.
4. Harmony or balance can and should be achieved.
5. The organisation can be changed by 're-engineering' or 're-configuring' and simplifying change.

These five key assumptions were clearly reflected in my thinking and interpretation of my practice when working with Roundphase. As described above, particularly in project one, Senge (1990), Argyris (1970; 1977), Deming (1994; 2000) and Seddon (2003; 2008) all argued emphatically that organisations *are* systems, should be thought of as such and although in different ways, all promulgated broadly the same process for changing them based on that assumption. All their change tools and techniques advocate some form of assessment of the current position versus an idealised state – that is, where leaders and managers want the organisation to be – followed by identifying changes that need to be made to deliver the improvement sought. This might include what tools to use, how to implement the changes, and then when to adjust actions dependent on feedback. These are the assumptions the Roundphase change management techniques and methods were based on. However, although my studies in traditional management and project management theory (Field and Keller, 1998; Johnson and Scholes, 2001; Thomsett, 2002; Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2002; Slack, Chambers and Johnston, 2004; Johnson and Scholes, 2002; Mintzberg, Quinn and Ghoshal, 1999) had also reinforced the systemic ways to understand and change organisations, reflecting on early work experiences, my undergraduate education about social change and Stacey and Mowles's (2016: 42-

200) critique of systemic ways of understanding organisations, has led me to different assumptions about organisations.

Stacey and Mowles propose that there are three main reasons why it is *not* helpful to think of organisations as systems (ibid: 191). Firstly they argue that assuming organisations are systems excludes the possibility of novelty and creativity because you are thinking about causality as formative. That is to say that mature forms, or improved organisational states, are already enfolded latently, and that all that is taking place are processes of unfolding of the enfolded form (ibid: 307). This is problematic because it implies something is already there, which is therefore not a radical theory of novelty which I would like to set out further on. Secondly, they argue that seeing organisations as systems, where humans then are taken to be parts of the system, fails to acknowledge human agency, the capacity for spontaneity and some degree of choice. Lastly, that thinking about an organisation as a system with a boundary creates an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ where it is possible to be an observer of the system, which is problematic, because you cannot be part of an organisation in any way and also at the same time outside and independent of it.

I agree with Stacey and Mowles’ critique of systemic ways to understand organisations because my research has demonstrated to me that my experience of organisational change does involve radical creativity, spontaneity and many other attributes that are negated if a systemic approach is taken. As discussed in project three, I also refute that improvisation is a change management tool or technique that can be used by consultants or managers to predictably change an organisation, because that assumption is also based in systemic ways of understanding organisations. I am arguing that conceiving of organisations as systems is unhelpful to my practice, because it does not reflect my experience and covers over the complexity I encounter when consulting. It also does not contribute to developing new understandings about organisational improvisation. Throughout my projects I have presented examples that demonstrate improvisation *does* involve novelty, creativity, spontaneity and choices, that as a consultant you cannot be independent, autonomous and ‘outside’ the organisation, but rather improvisational attempts at organisation change *mean* becoming involved with, and working in relation to others. I therefore find myself arguing, as Stacey does, that organisations are

“groupings of people engaged in some kind of joint activity that has some purpose – which could be to search for some purpose” (2011: 289) and that improvisation is a way of describing the interaction that takes place between the people or groups in an organisation, all the time, every day in every situation, which may or may not result in recognisable changes.

Taking on these alternative ways of understanding organisations and how they change led me to conclude project one by providing a different understanding of relationships within the consulting firm which I worked. Relating to Elias and Scotson's (1994) work about established and outsider groups, I provided an explanation that gossip and demonstrations of loyalty to one 'team' or another played an important part in who was allocated lucrative client work. However, in my original interpretation of project one, I limited my explanations of being seen to be loyal or disloyal to how the consulting techniques were implemented. In other words, I described the actions one took to signal being part of one group or another as solely associated with how one implemented or approached working practices and procedures. I would now problematise that argument by asserting that this was not the only way of being loyal or disloyal to various groups or teams. Examining the sexual and gendered nature of the groups that existed in Roundphase provides a far more complicated picture, which is what I would like to do now.

#### Processes of loyalty / disloyalty between gendered and sexual bodies

When I joined Roundphase there were about 70 consultants, most of whom were men who were married to women, whereas most of the women, like myself were childless and unmarried. There were also several married couples who both worked for the firm. Everyone in what I described in project one as Roundphase's elite group were men. The most significant proportion of work time was spent away from home near the client, staying in hotels with other consultants, if you were not working alone. In the rare times when larger groups of consultants would meet, these occasions would be typified by going for a beer and a curry, followed by drinking sessions in the hotel bar. Often lasting until the very early hours of the morning, the conversation was frequently about previous sexual conquests, although never about wives. However, there was sometimes an alternative to this, which was

to join the small, mainly women group and go for an Italian meal, drink wine and go to bed early. These dining patterns were also echoed through the week if you were away with others, with the men often boasting to each other about how many curries they had eaten in a week. I remember one man being constantly and openly disparaged by others because he did not like curry, the inference being he was not a real man. He left the company.

As well as the gossip related to working practices (described in project one) it was commonplace between consultants to gossip and tease each other about the nature of the relationship between consultant colleagues when away together. Some consultants would describe each other as their 'work-husband' or 'work-wife', a term used to describe a close working, non-sexual relationship whereas others would not provide explanations, creating a more ambiguous status. However, as an unmarried woman, who regularly found myself working away with someone else's husband, I was often asked by my male colleagues to say or do things that reduced the jealousy they were experiencing from their spouses, in other words, to reduce the threat that I posed to their marriage. As I was in a relationship with a woman at that time, my lesbian identity was often used to deflect suspicion.

Therefore, the group dynamics and patterns of inclusion and exclusion are far more complex than originally described in project one. Previously I focussed on only describing an elite group comprising the managing director and a few other men in relation to a large outsider group made up of the remaining consultants who formed into groups based on working practices. Whereas I am now saying that between members of the outsider group, patterns that are gendered and associated with sexual availability were ever present and being constantly negotiated between consultants. The meaning attached to being part of the group, to live up to the idealised view of a Roundphase consultant, and therefore gain lucrative client contracts, was not solely constituted through one's ability to correctly follow prescribed working practices. It also involved engaging with expressions of masculinity associated with eating curries and joining in with late night drinking sessions, or being sexually available or unavailable depending on which 'team' within the outsider group you associated with. These interactions between consultants created and sustained gendered and sexualised patterns associated with the consultancy group and I am now arguing that



failure to partake, like the man who would not eat curries, or the consultants who refused to stay up late drinking in the bar, risked exclusion in the same way as incompetent working practices. The ways in which you became involved demonstrated to others which group you were in. For me, this is what Montemurro, et al. mean when they say that understanding gender discourse is not limited to differences in the way the sexes talk, but about what patterns of femininity or masculinity, in this case the latter, demonstrate about power, respect and social status (2015: 141).

In making these interpretations, I am beginning to argue that gendered and sexual aspects associated with bodies gesturing and responding to each other at work are *ever present* in organisational relations whether we appreciate and comprehend them or not. In doing this I am agreeing with Acker, that “gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral” (1990: 146); in other words gendered practices are not separate from work processes but are irreducibly intertwined and happening at the same time. This is also a point made by Ouroussoff in her comparative study of two English organisational head offices, Bion and C&R, where she examines differences in the way female sexuality is regarded (2001: 35-58). Although she argues that the cultural differences in gender formulations are so distinct, it would be impossible to imagine a manager from Bion working effectively in C&R, in both organisations she describes how sexual liaisons are entangled with working life, albeit in completely different ways. At C&R understanding sexual liaisons is seen as necessary to comprehend organisational politics and are discussed openly. This included talking about the difficulties betrayed spouses experienced, and implications for work relations, of work based affairs and making “a clear link between the private world of sexual affairs and the public life of the organization” (ibid: 50). However, this is in contrast to Bion where there was a clear split between public and private, “wives on the outside, mistresses on the inside” (ibid: 51). Ouroussoff describes that management at Bion is seen as an exclusively male attribute and is connected to the ability to act independently and stay in control. Nearly all the directors had mistresses and those that did not, were concerned about how this would reflect on their ability to do their job. It was a collective ideal of managers at Bion to have a mistress as well as being associated with demonstrations of status.

Gender and sexuality are patterned differently in the two organisations Ouroussoff describes, which is also unlike those in Roundphase described above. I am arguing that this follows from the contextual improvisational nature of gender and sexuality in organisations as discussed in project four. However, in all these organisational contexts, group ideals associated with gender and/or sexuality are present and intrinsically linked to being part of the corporation and even to be seen as an effective member of the organisation. I believe this provides a much more complex picture of the link between improvisation and identity in organisations than is often conceived of. I reject interpretations of organisations and how they change that describe people as autonomous, unsexed, ungendered beings and argue instead that organisations contain interdependent, gendered and sexed bodies that are in relation with each other and it is through improvisations in these relationships, concerned with dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, that organisational change may arise.

Continuing with this perspective I will now turn to project two, starting with some reflection about the original interpretation of this project before reconsidering the relationships that I am involved with and attempting to change and influence.

### **Revisiting project two: Improvisational attempts at change, understanding power, gender and sexuality in organisations**

It is clear to me now that the original conclusions in project one, which doubted that change was brought about systematically through standard models and methods, affected my practice more than I have given credence to originally in project two. I knew as I started working at the City Council, the situation described in the narrative of project two, that the understanding gained through my research in project one had given me serious doubts about my practice, particularly my understanding that the prescribed methods I was expected to work with were solely responsible for bringing about the changes teams experienced. However, I had not fully realised the extent or consequences of these doubts that had started to shift the habits, routines and procedures I brought to my work away from an emphasis on describing and implementing the Roundphase techniques with the client, to working in totally different ways to try to enable the changes the client and I desired. For example, not starting the induction day with a long PowerPoint slideshow, but rather, facilitating

the staff that had come together to work on the project, to talk about what they wanted to achieve and how to work with each other.

I also overlooked the gendered and sexual nature of power relations through which we were influencing and persuading each other to attempt new working practices, or resist change. I would therefore like to begin by explaining more about this before providing further interpretations of this project.

#### The hidden transcript of project two, considerations of gender and sexuality

In my original project two narrative there are aspects of the work, which at the time I did not describe. I believe this was partly because I did not see them as important or significant to understanding my consulting practice and partly because recounting relationships in the way I have below has never been part of the way I would describe what was happening in and around a client contract. Therefore, returning to theory presented originally in project two, I now provide a hidden transcript (Scott, 1990: 4) associated with my attempts to innovate that were not previously publicly disclosed. They were even hidden from me to some degree, not in the sense that I was unaware of what was happening, because I remember the events described below well, but hidden from my conscious interpretation about what was occurring, sidelined as inconsequential. Perhaps this is because, as Burrell (1984) suggests, in Western societies we have almost desexualised our ways of conceiving of organisations without noticing, or perhaps as Montemurro et al argue, most women are “not comfortable talking about sex, particularly their own sexual activity or sexual feelings” (2015: 153). My view is that it is probably a combination of these factors that act to silence discussion about the sexual nature of organisations. But at the time of writing project two, I was concerned to understand why when I was attempting to innovate, which is what the managing director said he wanted, I was experiencing resistance from my colleagues and the client. Including consideration of sexual and gendered gestures, which is what I will turn to now, will enable a more complex and nuanced description of organisational improvisation than originally presented in project two.

I do not work with Social Workers – relationship with James

As client lead for City Council the client contract was initially allocated to James. However, he passed it to Olivia because he told us he would not work with social workers again. He was clear that he thought social workers were wishy-washy women who would not make decisions and went off with stress all the time and when they were present in the team, spent most of the time crying or refusing to do what he suggested.

I remember at the time feeling both angry about James' stereotypical views, which I took to at least partly reflect his attitude towards women generally, but also pleased that I had a chance at leading the assignment because I needed the money. Olivia and I both thought James' views reflected those of many other male consultants in Roundphase who believed Troubled Families, and indeed most of the Public Sector clients, were women's work and should therefore be led by women consultants. Even at the time I resented this attitude, where it seemed that an idealised view of the Public sector as caring, nurturing and providing were being aligned with similar views of femininity and conversely views of the private sector as strong, decisive and aggressive as well as associated with masculinity. However, I now also see a further implication of this gendered association. There was a considerable difference between the fees that Roundphase charged public and private sector clients, meaning that private sector contracts were considerably more profitable. Advocating in various ways that public sector work should be led by women consultants was a powerful way to control access to the more lucrative private sector contracts for male consultants. Whether deliberate or not, I am arguing, therefore, that as a consequence of the conversation of gestures (Mead, 1934) taking place in Roundphase, public sector work came to mean women's work and the more remunerative private sector jobs were men's work.

When talking about patterns emerging from the conversation of gestures I am including examples such as the more general disparagement of women through to telling jokes such as, 'What do you call a thought in a woman's head? A tourist'. Whether this gendered split was becoming more prevalent in the firm or whether it was taking on the Troubled Families work that brought it to our attention, I now

believe that noticing these patterns evoked a response in myself and Olivia. Reluctantly accepting that we were being allocated public sector work, which was less lucrative, our approach to the assignment, which we openly discussed, was a determination to demonstrate to the rest of Roundphase that an all women consulting team, and a virtually all women client team, could deliver innovative transformational change.

#### Unexpected intimacy – relationship with Oliver

It has always perplexed me, even in the original analysis of project two, why I was so irritated by Oliver, the client lead. I describe him as asking constant questions about what we were doing which I found exhausting. However, it is not unusual for a client lead to want regular meetings and to know what would be happening so why did I respond in this way to Oliver? In order to understand this more fully I want to describe some further background to my relationship with Oliver, which is not contained in project two, where I only reflect on his previous working relationship with James.

Oliver was an attractive man about the same age as me. Before starting the work at the City Council, we knew each other quite well as we had both been on a Roundphase residential course for a week together and therefore had spent a considerable amount of time learning and socialising together. On subsequent occasions we had always spoken in friendly terms when we met at other events, perhaps even flirting with each other. On the first day of familiarisation and scoping when Olivia and I met with Oliver, someone from his team offered us a hot drink and he and I both ordered coffee, his with sugar, mine without. When they arrived he took a large mouthful out of the mug in front of him and then realising there was no sugar in it, said they must have mixed ours up. He then lent over to me and offered me his cup saying something like I do not mind swapping if you don't.

My response to his gesture surprised me: feeling it was overly intimate to drink out of a cup he had just used, the offer of his mug made me feel slightly violated, that he was overstepping the mark, invading my body. At the time I assumed he did not see it this way, or even that it was a problem, and therefore not wanting to make a fuss or

behave peculiarly on the first day, I agreed and we exchanged mugs. Of course, I do not know how Oliver saw his gesture, perhaps he did not reflect on it at all. However, against the background of the Roundphase attitude that this assignment was women's work, I interpreted his gesture as a way of making me subordinate to him, rather than what normally happens where the client lead treats the external consultant as superior. I therefore believe my interpretation of this power exchange between us affected our relationship, particularly the way I subsequently reacted to his suggestions about how the work *should* be done. Rather than seeing them as well meaning recommendations or attempts to understand, I saw them as further attempts to control me and take over, which I was resisting.

#### Hidden romance – my relationship with Olivia

One of the clearest relational omissions from project two originally was my sexual relationship with Olivia. At the time of starting at the City Council we had been partners for about a year and regularly worked together with the same client. Although colleagues in Roundphase knew about our relationship, we did not routinely disclose this to clients, although it may have been more obvious than we thought. Whether clients knew we were together is not my reason for making the relationship explicit here. Rather it is to enable reflection about whether our closeness was related to our ability to be so innovative in this client assignment.

I believe the fact we were in a relationship significantly helped me to persuade Olivia to go along with my attempts to do the work differently. Despite our closeness, this was still a huge struggle and she really was not happy about my approach, often arguing with me about the serious repercussions I might experience from other Roundphase consultants. However, because of our relationship we talked regularly about what was happening, including reinforcing for each other what we interpreted as a disparaging attitude towards women's competence in Roundphase, which as I have already said, we both became determined to disprove through our actions. As a result, more often than not, Olivia did go along with my improvisations to the Roundphase procedures, seeing these as ways to resist 'the patriarchy'. The outcome of this was significant change in the council without following any of the prescribed techniques.

Having embellished project two with these further interpretations of the gendered and sexual nature of the relationships featured, I would now like to reconsider the ways these might alter the original interpretations of this project.

Thinking again about Project two and the relationship between power, innovation and control

My original conclusions about project two presented a dynamic where I was struggling to innovate, which is what the managing director and myself thought the client wanted, whilst my Roundphase colleagues resisted. Drawing on Foucault (1973; 1977) and Mead (1923) I argued that the prescribed Roundphase techniques had taken on an unquestionable quality, which enabled remote surveillance of consultants' conduct and subsequent internalisation of an idealised way to deliver the techniques that were impossible to live up to, due to the inevitably unique circumstances of each individual client. However, I would now argue that these interpretations tended towards a polarised view of what was happening, describing my attempts to be innovative on one side and my colleagues resisting me on the other. This interpretation now feels simplistic, because it overlooked a plurality associated with gendered and sexual patterns that emerged and also, the various attempts I made to resist. I would like to return to Foucault's considerations of power relations embellishing it with aspects of his work unexamined in the original project, although briefly referenced in project four, particularly resistance.

Foucault's theory of power relations claims that "where there is power there is resistance" (1978: 95) and despite descriptions of experiencing resistance from my colleagues originally in project two and now my further descriptions of resistance given above, I did not take time to examine or explain how these relations of power functioned. Foucault argues that power relations mean struggle, not necessarily in an evenly matched way, but nevertheless it is from the continuance of a situation, because one can never get outside of power relations, that the possibility of change can arise. He goes on to say that "If there was no resistance, there would be no power relations" only obedience (1994: 167) and of course this also a form of power relationship. Stressing the productive qualities of resistance as the way to change power relations, he also argues against a single point of resistance or a binary

conceptualisation of power versus resistance, rather arguing that through a plurality of resistances society, groups and individuals are rearranged.

Seeing power and resistance in this way therefore allows for a more complex picture of what is taking place between myself, my colleagues and the client. Originally I described the uncertainty with how to proceed in this assignment as a conflict of loyalty, I now see this indecision as a way to describe the power relations and associated struggles to improvise that I was engaged with. It is now perhaps possible to describe a multifarious web of power relations from which the innovations and improvisations described in this project arose. Rather than seeing resistance as only located within my colleagues and as in opposition to my actions, I now understand that in various ways I was also resisting.

#### Examining the plurality of resistance

Within this project, I am now arguing there is a complex intermeshing of relations of power, which transform or demonstrate struggle to transform through resistance. Firstly, I resisted through not using the prescribed Roundphase techniques. Secondly, I refused advice and guidance from Olivia and my other colleagues by going over their heads and seeking permission from the managing director to innovate. Thirdly, I resisted Oliver's help and advice because I saw this as part of a dominating gendered pattern. Lastly, I was supporting the client to resist their normal and familiar working practices and to do something different. On the other hand, I felt that some of my closest male colleagues in Roundphase were resisting the idea of coming to support this client's work as they thought public sector work should be led by woman consultants. I also saw James' refusal to take the job in the first place as resistance, probably avoiding being seen as a man doing woman's work. I am not saying this is an exhaustive interpretation. However, my point is to offer a much more nuanced and plural picture of power relations than presented originally in project two, one that not only involves struggle with improvisations associated with work processes and procedures but also with gendered and sexual gestures and responses, which in turn influences how the work is carried out.



Viewing the productive properties of resistance as described above perhaps affords the ability to see resistance as part of improvisational change, rather than seeing resistance in opposition to change as is so often the case in organisational studies (see Thomas and Hardy [2011: 323] for a comprehensive review). Therefore, as I turn to revisit project three, I would like to examine, in what ways thinking about relations of power and resistance in this way are related to innovation and improvisation?

### **Revisiting project three – Innovation, Improvisation, Power and Resistance**

Unlike my reinterpretations of projects one and two, where it was necessary to include some additional narrative to complete the previously unelaborated relationships and provide a fuller understanding of the complexity of improvisation in organisations, project three already detailed these. Therefore, I do not intend to include additional narrative material here but rather concentrate on examining the original research in light of the central themes emerging in this synopsis associated with improvisation.

Having discussed power at length originally in project two, its omission in project three now seems like a possible oversight. As it is also becoming a central part of my argument about organisational improvisation, I will concentrate here on examining the aspects of power that were overlooked originally in project three.

#### Considerations of power and group identities in project three

There were clearly complicated power relations between people described in the narrative of project three. Therefore, returning to the idea of an organisational game, groups and group identities from Elias introduced in project four, I would now argue that there were several discrete groups that were involved and struggling with one another to control the direction the game would take. Broadly I see these groups as: firstly Sophie and myself who wanted highways to improve their operation; secondly, the highways managers who wanted to reverse the outsourcing decision and return the operations in-house under their control; and lastly the highways contractor who wanted to deliver an efficient service as promised during contract

tender negotiations and to return a profit for their shareholders. These patterns were also reflected more generally across highways. The council teams refused to speak to contractor teams and the corporate teams at the council, such as change, HR and finance all reinforced a view that highways needed to improve. These three groups were not the only groups, there were also alliances formed through discussion about lack of female representation at board meetings and support for the local football team or their local rivals, amongst others. However, it was the incompatibility between the established group identities of the main three groups I have described above that I now believe created the struggle and tension I experienced, as the groups attempted to exercise power or resisted one another as the organisational game played out.

As described in the original narrative, despite many attempts by myself and others to outmanoeuvre Lewis, Logan and Harry, it felt like these never worked and that it was impossible to change highways as the patterns were so fixed and rigid. In the original interpretation of the project I argue that change did occur eventually through persistence, improvisation and persuading Noah over to my side. However, in my original discussion of the project, I disregarded how these struggles were attempts to shift the established, rigid power relations through resistance and subversion.

### Returning to resistance

Returning to Foucault's ideas of power and resistance, he argues that power relations can become rigid and therefore very difficult to alter because they have been "stabilized through institutions...and there are strongholds that are very, very difficult to suppress" (1994: 169). However, as discussed above he claimed that power relations can be altered through resistance, unless there is hegemonic domination, in which case there is only obedience. Expanding therefore on his theory of resistance Foucault argues that resistance is not only productive but "resistance really always relies upon the situation against which it struggles" (ibid: 198). I take this to mean that resistance needs tension for a change in power relations to arise. In extreme cases where transformation seems impossible, because power relations have become ossified, this only increases the struggle. For me, this

marries with my experience as improvisations that are attempts to change nearly always seem to involve struggle and tension.

However, despite marginalising my examination of power in my original version of project three, I did present relational ways of understanding how improvisation occurred between people by drawing on literature from jazz and improvisational theatre, Butler's theory of gender performativity (1988; 2006) and Mead's I/Me dialectic (1934). Having overlooked any discussions of power in this literature I would like to take time now to understand if that further enriches my understanding of improvisation. Firstly, there is very little discussion of power in the research on organisational improvisation, although I would argue that it is present in some of the literature that draws on the jazz and improvisational theatre metaphor. For example Kamoche et al (2003) describe that a good performance requires a balance between competition and collaboration and include discussions about sessions typified by brinkmanship. Barrett (1998b) discusses band members provoking the soloist and describes the commonly adopted structure where band members take turns to be in a solo or supporting role. I would now find myself arguing that these are ways of describing the relations of power between jazz band members, and how these are in an inseparable way bound up with the formation of the music. Similarly, in improvisational theatre Johnstone describes the importance of teaching actors awareness of status while performing, arguing that "every inflection and movement implies a status, and that no action is due to chance, or really 'motiveless'" (1981: 33). Here status is the term that Johnstone is using to describe how power relations are changing as the improvised performance is occurring, simultaneously together as actors, or as discussed above, musicians gesture and respond to each other.

As discussed in project four, Butler's theory (1988; 2006) does not describe bodily interactional communication, as I have done, drawing on Mead (1934), however her theory of performativity does include considerations of power and as I have not yet described this aspect of her work, I would like to now. She states "the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility" (2006: xxv). For her, gender performativity occurs within a dominating gender/sex binary, which is also typified by heterosexual normativity. For her, within this framework of norms it is performative acts, whether bodily or

speech acts, that provide the possibility of change or to draw attention to inconsistencies or flaws in seeing the normative structure as fixed and essential. Therefore the subjects she discusses, exercise agency within a normative power structure, which they are striving to change through performative (political) action.

I can therefore see similarities in the way Butler describes power and agency and Foucault's ideas of struggle and resistance presented above. Both see the subject acting within a context of historically constructed norms, which therefore dictate to a greater or lesser degree what takes place. However, whereas Butler sees performative iterations as both producing and contesting these norms at the same time, Foucault sees a much clearer distinction between acts of power and resistance. Describing the plurality of resistances he states that there are:

resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial

(Foucault, 1978: 96)

These descriptions seem to cover some aspects previously described as improvisation. However, this definition does not address action associated with blocking, which I shall turn to now. In the original project, drawing on Johnstone (1981), I argued improvisation includes acts of blocking, where groups acted to prevent change, to keep things the same. I would not exclude this from my interpretation of improvisation but I do not think Foucault's idea of resistance covers this aspect because within his theory, these are acts of power through which struggle and productive resistance emerges. Therefore, although many of the forms of improvisation that have been talked about in project three can be seen synonymously with Foucault's understanding of resistance, this cannot include the important aspects of improvisational interaction that includes actions which maintain existing patterns.

I shall return to the ideas of iterative performativity and resistance as part of the central arguments in this thesis, but before I do I will briefly revisit project four, and talk about the relationship between organisations and society.

## **Revisiting project four – Improvisation between social selves in organisations**

I do not wish to extensively reinterpret project four, as I have in many ways used it as the starting point for this synopsis and therefore already elaborated on the arguments presented. There is however, a point overlooked in the original version of project four that is probably worth some further explanation before I turn to the next section of this synopsis and draw together and present the central arguments of my thesis.

### We do not leave ourselves at the door

In the original conclusion to the project, I discuss the plurality of groups that exist in organisations and how I have understood that as a consultant there is potential advantage to me to associate with as many groups as possible. Describing the gendered or sexual nature of some organisational group identities, I explain the difficulties experienced when it is not possible to live up to all the idealisations of all the groups I attempt to claim membership of. My attempts to do this in order to gain understanding of the unfolding organisational game have implications for both the groups and myself. However, I feel there is perhaps an area that is insufficiently examined in the original project. This is the relationship between organisational selves and selves within society and how membership of groupings outside the organisation affect improvisation.

In my description of IDAHOT I say my motivations for wearing the rainbow thumbs up sticker was “wanting to be seen to support the eradication of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia” (page 116). Although I also wanted to signify something to Ellie, the wider aspirations associated with wearing the sticker was not solely associated with this particular organisation, but is a more general desire I have for society that then became entangled within organisational life. As a member of a group outside the organisation where we might adorn ourselves with rainbows, for example at a celebration of gay pride, I knew that wearing the sticker would be a way of joining a similar group within the organisation. Here there is congruence between actions I might take with those in the organisation and those outside it. I am not saying that this would always be the case, because I am sure that I would not have

worn a IDAHOT sticker whilst working with highways, as I would anticipate this identity being used in attempts to discredit me as a person. However, despite the choices I make about whether to openly demonstrate my allegiance with LGBT friends within the organisations I am working in, my out-of-work relationships with these people may in turn influence what happens within the organisation. For example, through LGBT social situations I meet people who also work for the same organisation. Often these conversations involve gossip about what is happening and could lead to building plans and strategies to influence others at work. I might also have access to people with an organisationally superior status that otherwise I would not. What I am drawing attention to here is, it is not only groups within the organisation that influence and attempt to control what happens, but there may be hidden structures of power that then effect the improvisations groups or individuals within the organisation make. Another example would be the alleged influence freemasons have over organisations in the UK public sector (Cobain, 2018) (Dodd, 2017).

External influences within organisations may not always be secret and hidden. For example, recently in a meeting where we were attempting to understand why the manager of the Licencing service was not supporting the proposed IT developments, someone offered to talk to him about this when they played football together the following week. Of course this was an open offer and everyone at the meeting anticipated that the knowledge gained through this conversation would help understand and then overcome the difficulties that existed for Licencing manger. We were glad to have access to this insight, gained outside organisational settings, which seemed more likely to be a frank and honest response, not censored by organisational considerations, in order to move the IT developments forward.

Returning to the theory presented in project four, there is no 'I' identity without a 'we' identity, but I am now drawing attention to the fact that these are not contained neatly either within organisations or outwith organisations in society, but come together as people improvise in local interaction, in particular contextual situations. Being a member of a local gay pride group or a freemason are aspects of identity that are not discarded when one arrives at work, but persist and may have an affect on the improvisational interactions one finds oneself performing.

Having critiqued and embellished the analysis of my projects as originally written, I would now like to turn to summarising and presenting my main arguments concerning processes of improvisation in organisations. These will be drawn from what has already been described together with previously unexamined insights as a basis for clearly demonstrating my original contributions to knowledge and practice, at the end of this chapter.

I begin this section of the synopsis by presenting my first argument, which arises from a question that I feel I have not thoroughly addressed in the research presented so far. That question is, in organisations what is being improvised and how is this taking place? Whilst I have moved from a position of understanding improvisation to be more than changes to working practices and involve wider aspects of identity I have not yet clearly explained what is being maintained or contested in improvised interactions, so I will now describe this.

### **Argument one: Improvisations are moves in the organisational game**

#### What is being improvised in organisations?

Whilst I have pointed to why metaphors from jazz and improvisational theatre have perhaps somewhat limited our understanding of organisational improvisation, by not taking account of action that maintains existing patterns or power relations, I still believe there are analogies that can be taken from these other domains that help us understand organisational improvisation and so I will start with that literature.

In jazz or improvisational theatre it seems obvious what is being improvised and how this is taking place. For example Barrett states “the goal of improvisation is to create new music on the spot” (1998b) making it clear that in jazz what is being improvised by the musicians is the melody. Whereas, in improvisational theatre the actors are creating and adapting a scene or a play for the audience to watch (Vera and Crossan, 2004; Johnstone, 1981). Typically in both of these analogous disciplines improvisation is also synonymous with the actors or musicians performing to an audience. However, what is the equivalent to the melody or scene in organisations? How can we conceive of organisational improvisation taking place as ongoing interaction as described above, rather than only as planned entertainment as is the case in jazz or improvisational theatre? In order to answer these questions I would first like to describe in more detail my understanding of the organisational game that I have previously referred to.



### The organisational game

As discussed in project three and four, I am using the term organisational game in a similar way to Bourdieu (1990) and Elias (1978) as a way to describe both the entirety and plurality of social interaction in organisations we are invested in.

Bourdieu argues that we are caught up in social games where, as players we react to what we foresee other players doing. This includes taking into account not just of the players immediately present but an anticipation of how everyone involved will move. He argues that this happens spontaneously, there and then (1990: 82).

Connecting the game into his theory of practice, which includes habitus (explained in project one) and fields, which are the social structures or generalisations associated with various groups, he argues that proleptic adjustments required by a field are what constitute a feel for the game (ibid: 66). The game is, therefore, a way of describing how actions of those committed to a field play out. I am arguing that in organisations as interdependent people are bound up in relations of power, we are also caught up in social games. As individuals and groups we struggle against one another to take part in and gain control of the game in order to get what we want and I am saying that the moves we make could also be called improvisations.

I am arguing, therefore, from a complex responsive processes perspective, that improvisational moves are taking place all the time in the organisational game as part of ongoing local interaction. I am using the term organisational game to refer to all the many ways in which interdependent social human beings in organisations who are in in relations of power find themselves. I am not using the term 'game' to disparage what goes on in organisations, or to imply that it is simple or that it can be controlled, but as a way to describe the many ongoing interactions taking place between people and groups in organisations.

Reiterating an important point about what this way of thinking about organisations implies, there is no possibility to step outside of the 'game', or our interdependent relations of power, to control what will happen. One can only make a move in the game, anticipating what might happen, but the anticipated result cannot be guaranteed or certain. Management change methodologies, such as those I used at Roundphase (Seddon, 2003; 2008), are dependent on the assumption that a

consultant has the ability to plan and dictate what will happen, when and how. In contrast, I am arguing that all they can do is get a feel for the game and demonstrate a willingness to participate in it. I am not saying that everyone in the game is equal, because we are improvising within relations of power that are uneven. Consultants hired by high status members of the organisation might benefit from their endorsement as the organisational game plays out. But the ability to make strong moves in the organisational game does not provide assurance of a predictable outcome because the interdependent nature of the game means the consultant's moves mobilise others who struggle to resist.

Whilst it might be unusual to find people in organisations talking about the organisational game in the way I have described above, individuals do attempt to make sense of what is going on around them. As I am arguing that improvisations are moves in the organisational game, examining the ways people talk and make sense of what is happening is important to understanding improvisation, so I will turn to this next.

#### Narrative patterns organise our experience of the organisational game

I have argued that improvisations maintain or change generalisations or global patterns (Stacey, 2011), describing these as understood ways to proceed in an organisation. For example these could be about how to deliver good customer service or the expectations of women consultants in the case of gendered generalisations. Mowles describes these patterns that staff in organisations use to structure their experience as narrative themes, "Staff make sense together in both abstract and particular ways and contribute to organisational narratives about what is going on" (2011: 63). In other words, Mowles is arguing that during local interaction in organisations staff are organising their experience through narrative themes as they discuss what is happening in conversation with one another. This also happens through non-verbal gestures, such as ways of dressing, which might be concerned with distinguishing oneself as a manager rather than any member of staff, for example. In making this link with narrative themes, I am not moving away from the paradox of the individual and the social (see pages 109-111) where local interaction between bodies is at the same time creating or sustaining global patterns.

However, I find describing the generalisations as narrative themes extremely helpful. This is because it seems to me to be a clearer way of articulating that a narrative theme might develop due to communication about the game itself. That is to say, a pattern might develop which is not about expectations of women or how to give good customer service, as referred to above, but about interpretations of what is happening or what might happen in the organisation in the future. To take a recent example from my experience, the CEO at the council I am currently working with is leaving. The narrative themes currently dominating the organisation are all associated with speculation about who will apply and be appointed to the job, whether she will be replaced with a man or a woman and the effect that might have, and lastly whether certain initiatives that are seen as hers will continue or stop. This later one is particularly interesting because it highlights how narrative themes become bound up with identity. Because the digital transformation programme is talked about as ‘her baby’ people are now openly talking about whether it will continue when she leaves. This is a powerful move in the organisational game, a way to openly raise questions about the validity and purpose of the programme and undermine or stop it, something which would have remained as a private transcript had she not been leaving. I will return to this point later in the synopsis.

I have previously described the conversations Olivia and I had about gender bias in Roundphase whilst working at the City Council and the effect it had on us to demonstrate our competence as women consultants. I am now saying that this narrative theme was not only organising how we might make our improvisations in the organisational game but also how we made sense of the moves of others. Because we convinced ourselves that there was a narrative theme in Roundphase that was disparaging to women, this influenced our actions and our interpretation of other people’s actions. This extended beyond men employed by the consultancy and included my reading of Oliver’s motives as I had grouped him with them.

Returning to the questions at the beginning of this section of the synopsis, I believe it is possible to say that through improvised moves in the organisational game, the narrative themes that organise our experience are maintained and changed. Narrative themes are, therefore, the equivalent of the melody in jazz. Organisational improvisation is the action of interdependent bodies that seek to alter or sustain those

themes, whether those are to do with working methods, what it means to be a female consultant or how we are making sense of what is happening or what might happen. However, before I turn to the next part of my argument about precisely how improvisation in organisations takes place, I do not want to forget the point that not all narrative themes seem equally contestable. Indeed, I have already argued that my research has helped me to understand how identity is bound up with organisational life much more than I previously recognised. Whereas before, some narrative themes like those associated with gender and sexuality seemed separated, distinct and not connected to what it means to talk and think about work, I am now arguing that in complex ways they do feature in how the organisational game plays out. In order to understand why some narrative themes, such as those associated with gender and sexuality, that organise our experience seem both fixed and hidden, I want to return to Mead's (1923) understanding of cult value.

#### Cult values of narrative themes

Originally in project two, I limited my explanation of cult values (Mead, 1923) as solely associated with the Roundphase tools and techniques, arguing that they had taken on an unquestionable quality that caused conflict between consultants as they used them in standardised ways in every client. The techniques were cult values because they had become idealised values of Roundphase and therefore beyond doubt. But I now find myself arguing that perhaps part of the reason they were cult values was because they were so bound up with the identity of Roundphase and what it meant to be a Roundphase consultant. What I am pointing to here is that the tools appeared to be fixed and unalterable because to question them was at the same time also questioning both the group's and one's own identity. If you did not need to know or use the techniques, what made you a Roundphase consultant? It seems, therefore, that in this case the tools became cult values because to question them raised a threat to identity. I will return to this aspect of my argument later in this synopsis. For now I just want to say that there appear to be other narrative themes associated with identity that have become cult values in organisations and seem unalterable although they are not, as discussed in project four.

I am arguing that the reason narrative patterns associated with how gender and sexuality are bound up in organisational life are often overlooked is because they become cult values of organisations. As Mead writes, we then pay homage to them not do justice to them (1923: 238). Whether narrative themes about how to act professionally at work or HR policies designed to prevent sexual harassment in the work place obfuscate enquiry and open discussion about people in relationships at work and other gendered and sexual patterns, I am arguing that they exist and affect how the organisational game plays out. Perhaps because our genders and sexuality are such important aspects of our identities it is uncomfortable to bring them into question in any way. Or maybe, as discussed above, because gendered attributes can be closely entwined with what it means to be competent at work, they become cult values and operate as narrative themes that are almost incontrovertible.

This brings me onto my next main argument, which is to describe how improvisation maintains and changes narrative themes.

## **Argument two: Improvisation both maintains and changes the status quo**

Having described improvisation as moves within the organisational game that alter or maintain narrative themes present in organisations, I now want to turn to explaining how these moves take place.

### How narrative themes in organisations are improvised

In order to inquire into ‘how’, from this perspective organisational improvisation occurs, I will begin by artificially distinguishing between action that maintains existing narrative patterns and those that are attempts to change them. I am doing this in order to analyse improvised interaction, not necessarily to argue that improvisation is experienced differently in contrasting situations, but as a way to fully explain how I understand improvisation to be taking place. However, in doing this I am not disregarding the relational nature of improvisational activity, where gesture is at the same time evoking a response. An improvised action to change narrative patterns may provoke a response that is an attempt to maintain the existing pattern. Rather, I am separating out categories of action in order to describe them in the same way as Mead describes *feint* and *parry* as part of a conversation of gestures in boxing and fencing (1934: 43). I am also deliberately not making evaluative judgements about whether improvisations that lead to change are good or not. Neither am I saying that improvisation that maintains or changes existing patterns should either be discouraged or encouraged or vice versa, I am simply trying to describe interaction. I will start with improvised action in organisations that I have already argued is largely overlooked and that is processes of improvisation that maintain existing narrative patterns.

### Processes of improvisation that maintain existing narrative patterns

“In life, most of us are highly-skilled at suppressing action” (Johnstone, 1981: 95).

I have included in my description of improvisation action that maintains existing patterns. I have described above many possible ways this happens, through blocking and resistance. Returning to the analogy of improvised theatre and the work of

Johnstone, he provides a long list of specific techniques that improvisers use when they are being defensive that kill stories and prevent anything unexpected from occurring, for the full list see (1999: 101-128). In other words, having worked with improvisational theatre performers, he understood the actions they took that had the effect of stalling the story or preventing the development of alternative narrative themes. When actors performed in these ways they maintained the existing narrative patterns, inhibiting the development of the scene, and I am arguing that this also happens in organisations when people or groups resist or block each other as previously described. These actions do not lead to questioning the current narrative patterns of organising, rather to maintaining them and the power relations that support them, although it does indicate a form of action that realises current norms are being questioned.

Until this point, I have used examples of myself attempting to change narrative themes provoking reactions from other people who respond by maintaining the status quo (see page 42). In other words I have situated this aspect of improvisation within the conversation of gestures as an emergent response in opposition to attempts at changing the power relations, as the moves of the organisational game play out. However, I do not want to simplify or limit understanding of improvisation to merely a reactive response, because this seems to exclude improvised interaction which is also going on that maintains narrative patterns, such as gender and sexuality. Here I am indicating that the reactive way I have been describing improvisation does not seem to include the habitual, iterative improvisations that produce and reproduce themes that are so stable that they seem fixed but are not. Rather, they are in fact being created and sustained through the iterative interaction of bodies. I am arguing here from a complex responsive processes perspective, that if there is nothing outside of local interaction, *all* narrative patterns must be constantly created and recreated through the action of bodies. It is not that themes associated with gender or sexuality are being structured or structuring our experience in a different way to any other theme. Rather that some patterns are sustained in an iterative repetitive way, that means it is almost imperceptible that this is taking place. This gives the impression of an abiding self, as Butler would argue (2006: 191), and narrative patterns that appear fixed. Although, as I have argued above they are not rigid and unchangeable as every iteration is susceptible to subversion which could give rise to a change in

both the individual and what the narrative theme means to the respective group. As I am now starting to talk about how narrative patterns can be changed I shall turn to this next.

### Processes of improvisation that change the status quo

In project three I described ways novelty emerged during improvised interaction, focusing mainly on novelty emerging through provocative competence, performativity or spontaneity. Here, I will return to novelty and its relation to improvisation, because I wish to examine metaphors from jazz and improvisational theatre to understand improvised action in organisations that are attempts to alter the narrative organising patterns.

Johnstone (1981: 100) sees the key to improvised action that develops the story occurring when actors learn how to offer and accept. Offers are “any new idea brought into an improvised scene, whether a line of dialogue, gesture, mime or whatever” (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008: 408) and ‘accepting’ is doing just that, accepting an offer. Performing these actions is a foundational principle of improvisational theatre, sometimes referred to as ‘yes and’ moments (Johnstone, 1999: 36). Actors make offers to each other and accept these ideas, therefore developing the scene and the story in an interesting way. Vera and Crossan (2004: 740) also stress the importance in improvisational theatre of accepting the offers of other actors and supporting and enhancing them. In organisations improvised action involving offering and accepting happens all the time as people negotiate possibilities with each other, agree and support each other. I have already partly reflected this in project three drawing on Bogers and Larsen’s description of invitations (2012). In that project Sophie offers me a role to come and work with her and I accept. I would argue this is her attempt to change the existing narrative patterns and power relations, by bringing someone else into her group in the organisation that will support her and others in their attempts to change highways. By accepting her invitation, I am joining her group and I am therefore expected to maintain the narrative patterns associated with it, which would include a belief that highways needed to change. I am saying that this improvised move between Sophie and me, of offer and acceptance, was part of the wider organisational game playing



out between Sophie and the highways managers. I now see a possible way of thinking about this is that she believed bringing me into her group augmented her chances to control the organisational game and get what she wanted, which was an improved highways service.

Other ways narrative patterns in improvisational theatre are changed is through connecting and reincorporating previously disconnected or abandoned information back into the narrative forming new meanings. I would argue this also happens when people in organisations improvise and reinterpret. For example, in project three, I found myself adopting this technique by changing the story about the backlog of jobs. By connecting the existence of the backlog to the implementation of a new computer system but not to the incompetence of the contractors, I changed how staff saw and subsequently dealt with the jobs. Until that point, the computer system had not featured as part of the narrative about the backlog. Bringing in this detail changed, for some, the understanding of the reason the backlog was occurring, motivated them to work with the contractor to reduce the backlog and, at the same time, undermined the position of the highways managers who had been suggesting alternative reasons for its existence.

Lastly from improvisational theatre are improvisations that are attempts to change the status quo through interrupting routines. This technique is described by Johnstone as a great way to make up stories, by presenting a routine and then later interrupting it (1981: 138). He argues this brings excitement for the audience and therefore draws them in. The same is true in jazz performances where either individual performers practice interrupting well-known riffs or provoke each other into breaking familiar musical patterns (Barrett, 1998b). But does this also happen in organisational improvisation? I would argue that it does. Firstly, I now recognise I do something similar all the time in my practice, identifying certain organisational routines that are often stuck patterns, maintaining the existing power relations and therefore preventing new things from developing. In one way or another, I attempt to interrupt them. This is perhaps merely by drawing attention to them or perhaps by attempting to deliberately act in ways not congruent with the pattern. For example, in highways, having talked with others in the organisation I assessed the likely actions the managers would take and tried to subvert them. Although initially this

did not work, I would argue that I was improvising to try to interrupt organisational routines. However, I would also argue that interrupting routines is the primary way narrative patterns, such as those associated with gender and sexuality, are improvised. In those cases, it is against a long history of iterative repetitive routines that subversive performances lead to altering these habits and perhaps the meaning of the narrative themes that describe them.

So far I have presented ways of describing improvisation in organisations based on metaphors from improvised theatre and jazz. Taking this approach is common to many authors who write about organisational improvisation and indeed, as I have argued, has led to incomplete consideration of organisational improvisations that are attempts to keep things the same. However, although I have now used these metaphors to broaden understanding of organisational improvisation that does not lead to change, I still feel there is something incomplete about the understanding of organisational improvisation I have presented, associated with improvisations that attempt to change organising narrative themes. I think this gap arises due to an important aspect of jazz and improvisational theatre that has so far been overlooked. This is the connection between the improvised performance and how the challenge of creating something new is a demonstration of the performers' skill (Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha, 2003). What I am saying here is that you would not have to persuade Miles Davis or Charlie Parker to improvise; that is what they want to do. However, surely in organisations we are also attempting to change or maintain narrative patterns through *persuading* other people to take action in one way or another? In other words we use the art of rhetoric.

#### Improvisation as persuasion: rhetoric

The study and use of rhetoric dates back to ancient Greek times, with Aristotle regarded as the father of rhetoric (Andrews, 2014: 17). In his comprehensive volume about Aristotelian philosophy, in order to examine the overlaps and differences between rhetoric and phronesis (practical judgment), Eikeland describes Aristotle's works on the subject (2008). Eikeland argues that Aristotle's writings about rhetoric were not about "the performance of a speech ... [but] a theoretical study of the means of persuasion used when performing as a speaker on different occasions, and

in different contexts” (2008: 106). He goes on to explain that eloquence or rhetoric can be seen both as persuasive and seductive. They are attempts to move the audience to endorse, or not, a decision or action using words and imagery whilst at the same time being polemic or antagonistic towards opponents. Unlike *phronesis*, which is an open virtuous pursuit to find the correct and best way to do things, rhetoric is less open, looking for “arguments to support certain favoured and pre-determined conclusions” (ibid: 108). Rhetoric, by making appeals to *ethos* (character), *pathos* (emotion) as well as *logos* (logic), is not always virtuous and can be manipulative, unlike *phronesis* which is seeking the right thing to do. The last distinction Eikeland draws attention to is the different way deliberation is dealt with by Aristotle in his descriptions of *phronesis* and rhetoric. Aristotle’s writings on rhetoric contains the study of deliberation, in other words rhetoric is deliberative. This is mainly concerned with the preparatory phases of *inventio* (invention), *dispositio* (arrangement) and *elocutio* (style), which occur before performance and are designed to support the argument either for or against the chosen position. Whereas in *phronesis* deliberation is more individualised searching the pros and cons in order to find the best thing to do (ibid 108-109).

Although Aristotle’s strong influence is clear in modern texts about rhetoric (Andrews, 2014), the understanding of rhetoric has developed to explicitly include topics such as “visual rhetoric, showing how clothing, gesture, and the use of physical space can reinforce verbal messages” (Toye, 2013). “As Aristotle suggested, the art of rhetoric lies in identifying the opportunities presented by the situation at hand” (ibid). This is why I am including rhetoric as improvisational interaction. It provides a way of describing acts of persuasion, which for me must be included in understanding organisational change as it is what I spend much of my time doing in organisations. As reflected in my narratives I attempted to persuade Lewis, Logan, Harry, Olivia and many others to understand narrative themes differently. But rhetoric is also concerned with giving a performance, one designed to persuade others towards a predetermined point of view. The need for persuasion means it cannot be a view already held by the other and therefore it must involve attempts to change their current understanding of a narrative theme. In doing this, one may make appeals that are not just about logical or deduced conclusions but draw on emotions and make claims about character, which mean, therefore, the

rhetoric can be seductively and manipulatively convincing as it is not just an appeal to logic or rational arguments. I am arguing therefore that rhetoric is an important way of understanding some improvisational attempts to change narrative themes because, like Butler's theory of gender, it involves performance. It is this link between improvisation and performance that I would like to continue to examine in the next section.

### Improvisation and performance to an audience

Performance to an audience is a central tenet of improvisation in jazz and theatre. The live audience represent who the performance is being created for, there and then. The performers must anticipate and react to cues from the audience to deliver a good performance. Barrett describes how performing in this way presents risks to the jazz musicians as there is no way to replay or recreate what has just happened (1998b: 283). Whereas Sawyer (2000: 156) describes how in improvisational theatre the audience are involved in the performance in a number of ways, including shouting out suggestions to the actors. When these metaphors are brought into understandings of organisational improvisation, the performative element of improvisation becomes caught up in discussions of who are the equivalent of the audience. For example Hadida and Tarvainen argue the audience are co-workers, project leads, external partners or other stakeholders (2014: 17) whereas Kamoche et al suggest that audiences are made up from customers of the organisation (2003: 2046).

I find myself arguing that these definitions of the audience in organisational improvisation are too narrow and bound by role definitions. If this argument is accepted, the issue then becomes whether project managers or customers or any specific group should be included as an audience within certain instances where improvisation has occurred. But, I am describing improvisational activity very differently, as ongoing social processes within organisations. Does this remove the need to understand the role of the audience, or just to think differently about it? This is the question I would like to turn to next.

Returning to the metaphors of jazz and improvisational theatre, I want to emphasise that the audience is involved in improvisation, as the musicians or actors anticipate

and react accordingly as they create the scene or the music. In project two (see page 53) I have argued that something similar happens in social communications in organisations, by explaining Mead's concept of the generalised other (1934: 154). This concept describes how individuals have the ability to anticipate the tendencies of specific groups or society as a whole to respond to their gestures as the social act occurs. This therefore both enables and constrains what happens as part of the act. I am arguing that there is a role for the concept of an audience in organisational improvisation, which enables and constrains what happens and that audience is represented by the generalised other. As improvisational interaction is taking place in organisations we are always thinking about how others present and not present might react to our gestures and this in turn affects our specific moves in that place at that time. I am arguing that it is this anticipated response that forms and informs our improvisation in organisations: the generalised other functions as the audience.

Before I present argument three, I want to draw this second argument to a close by revisiting the existing descriptions of improvisation from a complexity perspective presented by Friis (2006: 86-87), as explored in project three, and discuss what is involved in performing improvisations in organisations.

Improvisational performance that maintains and changes narrative themes at the same time: the paradox of the rehearsed/unrehearsed

“The best players practice relentlessly so that they are prepared to be spontaneous”  
(Barrett, 1998b: 283)

In project three I presented Friis' arguments about improvisation as he was the only author I found who had written about improvisation that maintained existing patterns. In much the same way as I have above, he splits improvisation into two types. Describing improvisation as either repetitive actions based on plans and routines or spontaneous actions that lead to transformation and novelty. In the original project I challenged this by bringing in Butler's theory of gender performativity (1988; 2006), where novelty emerges through iterative action. I therefore questioned Friis' understanding that repetitious actions were distinct from novelty. However, I still persisted with describing discrete types of improvisational

actions, as I have above, some that maintained patterns and others that were attempts to shift them. It is this separation that I now want to revisit and challenge.

I am arguing that there is nothing outside of local interaction structuring experience, that the improvisational action of bodies create and sustain narrative patterns. Therefore, this must mean that our actions are both maintaining and changing narrative patterns at the *same time*. For example, whilst I am using rhetorical techniques as attempts to change a narrative theme, I am at the same time maintaining aspects of identity through iterative habitual actions, like those associated with being a woman. What I am saying is that whilst we can describe actions that seem to either maintain or change narrative themes to a greater or lesser extent, there must be an element of these actions taking place simultaneously, because neither are all narrative themes changing nor are they all staying the same. In order to develop my understanding of this quality of improvisation, I want to understand what, if any, analogies can be taken from jazz and improvisational theatre.

As suggested by the quote at the beginning of this section, Barrett argues that it is deceiving and incorrect to see jazz improvisation as creating tunes from nowhere. He describes many ways that the best musicians practice, through imitating famous soloists, creating ‘licks’ and ‘riffs’ which are patterns and phrases that can be relied upon, performing in different keys, time signatures and rhythms, all in preparation to improvise spontaneously (1998b: 283-284). The same is true in improvisational theatre, where discipline and practice are required in order to be able to perform well (Vera and Crossan, 2005: 206) and specific techniques are used to rehearse, some of which I have already described (Johnstone, 1981; 1999).

Therefore, in both of these analogous disciplines improvisation could be described as the spontaneous performance of both rehearsed and unrehearsed material at the same time. In other words the performance is neither fully rehearsed nor completely unrehearsed, it is a simultaneous combination of both elements, which come together at the moment of performance, enabled and constrained by other performers and the audience. I am saying that *if* a performance could be replicated exactly as it was rehearsed nothing about it would be improvised. But on the other hand if it were

wholly unrehearsed, bereft of any known techniques, there would not be sufficient cues to enable the other musicians or performers to play together. Therefore, in my experience and understanding neither of these extremes are possible. Instead, I am arguing that improvised performance must arise from the paradox of the rehearsed and the unrehearsed. Here I am using paradox in the same way as Mowles (2015: 33) does, from Hegel, as a way to describe social experience where contradictory opposites are simultaneously occurring yet also unresolvable. Where the dialectical tension that exists between the opposites can then be seen as generative, whether that be creative or destructive. Whilst this paradoxical viewpoint seems to hold true for jazz and improvisational theatre, how does this understanding support explanations of organisational improvisation?

I have drawn attention above to a flaw in my previous way of thinking about organisational improvisation stating that it must both be changing and maintaining narrative patterns at the same time. I am now arguing that the iterative habitual responses of the body must occur simultaneously with more deliberate attempts at change. I therefore *do* see a parallel between organisational improvisation and the understanding I have developed above from jazz and improvisational theatre. In organisational improvisation one is not constantly creating and recreating new moves in the game. One also relies on rehearsed actions, be those to do with identity or rhetorical techniques developed to persuade others. On the other hand these cannot be produced exactly as previously rehearsed because every situation we find ourselves in is slightly different and we are in relation to different others who call out unexpected responses from us and therefore in the spontaneous moment of improvised performance, there is always an element of action that is unrehearsed. I am therefore arguing that in organisations, improvisation can be thought of as spontaneous performances arising from the paradox of the rehearsed and the unrehearsed, where our ability to take ourselves as objects to ourselves gets *aufgehoben* as consciousness.

In summary, I have been arguing that whilst it seems possible to separate and recognise improvised action into either those that maintain existing narrative themes or those that change them, organisational improvisation actually sustains and alters narrative patterns at the same time. This emerges in the spontaneous moment of

performance arising from the paradox of the rehearsed and the unrehearsed, where the anticipated response from the audience enables and constrains the performance.

I want to continue by presenting my final argument that develops this understanding of organisational improvisation and focuses on understanding how and why it can raise threats to identity.



### **Argument three: Improvisation raises threats to identity, and identity is complex and social**

In my previous two arguments I have described what is being improvised in organisations and elaborated how I understand this to be taking place. In a couple of places (for example see page 164) I have pointed to the ability for improvisational performances to raise threats to identity. Therefore, in this final argument of this thesis, I wish to concentrate on explaining how this occurs and how organisational identities are socially formed and more complex than currently recognised in much of the literature on improvisation.

#### Improvisation raises threats to identity

Above I have argued that narrative themes associated with identity, which can also be thought of as generalisations of groups (see project four), can become what Mead would call a cult value (1923: 238) and therefore appear unquestionable and beyond challenge. These are similar to the way Butler refers to norms. She describes them as temporal, constructed through the repetitive structure of performance but become law-like in the way that they are repeated (2004: 217-223), whereas Bourdieu presents norms as potential codifications (1990: 76-87). In different ways, all these writers are pointing to a pattern whereby the more a narrative theme is reinforced in a particular way, the more people within that group or organisation are likely to follow that rather than act in any other way. The reason for this is due to the impact on their identity. In my way of thinking about improvisation, I might say that in these cases the audience becomes a stronger influence on the performance and therefore people improvise in ways congruent with the majority for fear of shame or embarrassment that might be caused by moves which challenge the current power relations. This is where risk is involved, because improvisational moves that challenge these law-like or cult values might risk exclusion from the group.

Throughout my projects I have drawn attention to situations in organisations where power structures persist and the potential to change the status quo is limited because issues are not raised and discussed openly. For example, in project two I described the situation where consultants innovate, however they do not openly disclose this.

In project three women in the Highways department tell me they feel they are not treated equally to men, and again they do not raise this. In project four, I do not question Jacob's inappropriate behaviour towards me because I was new to the organisation. I did not know what was acceptable and in that moment none of my colleagues reacted in ways that might support me to talk about it, so I kept quiet. For me these examples potentially illustrate a phenomenon called pluralistic ignorance. Floyd Allport first used the term *pluralistic ignorance*, according to Miller and McFarland, "to describe the situation in which virtually all members of a group privately reject group norms yet believe that virtually all other group members accept them" (1987: 298). Miller and McFarland (1991) suggest it is perpetuated when employees who seek to maintain a social identity with the group publicly support a direction of action that they do not privately support and misinterpret that their situation differs from what others are experiencing. Therefore, taking the example from Roundphase, which I explored in project two, I am saying that individually consultants innovate because they have to adjust to many different client situations, but believe it is unacceptable to the group to reinterpret the techniques and therefore do not risk their identity by disclosing what they have been doing. If we accept that because the managing director wants consultants to innovate (see page 46), and it is incorrect to believe the group do not want to evolve the techniques, then this is an example of pluralistic ignorance.

For me, this then raises three questions. Firstly, did individual consultants wrongly understand the group's norms? Secondly, how can we understand if consultants were just misreading the situation? Thirdly, if consultants were correctly understanding group norms, how can we understand the risk involved in challenging these if they believed the techniques should be innovated? It is precisely the nature of these questions that give me doubts about the concept of pluralistic ignorance. If we take the first question, this could only ever be answered in hindsight, after some improvised performance by a consultant then made the group's norms clear. Once this had taken place it might be possible to argue, depending on the reaction, that it became obvious that the group did not want to change the Roundphase techniques. However, taking this view denies both the anticipatory and relational nature of improvisation that I have been describing. An improvised performance is based on the expected reaction, but both the gesture and the response emerge together in the

social act, one is influencing the other, neither are fixed, so there is always some uncertainty about what will happen. This is related to the second question, there is always the possibility for misreading the situation and thinking you are acting in accordance with the group, when in fact you are not. Turning to the third question I want to recognise that encouraging people to speak out because they might mistakenly think it is only they that hold a particular belief, seems to me to be one of the main intentions of pluralistic ignorance theory. Often the scenarios examined idealise situations where people should talk publicly, for example, students asking questions in class as they are not the only person who does not understand (Grant, O'Neil and Stephens, 2009: 59-60). I shall return to understanding what might be involved in these types of improvisational performances that involve speaking out shortly. For now, I wish to outline the threats to identity that the situation I have been examining raises.

If the managing director wanted you to innovate and you do not because you wrongly interpret the narrative themes of the group, you may be seen as incompetent. If on the other hand you start to change the techniques and none of your colleagues think you should, you could be excluded. However, as discussed previously in this synopsis, because the consulting techniques were cult values of the organisation, whether or not the group wanted to innovate, raising questions about the techniques also raises a threat to the identity of the whole group. As I have said, I do not believe it is possible to definitively know which, of any of these, or the many other alternatives, might occur as one makes a move in the organisational game. But in all these possibilities improvisation raises threats to the identity of individuals or the group. Whilst I have been discussing a situation from my experience where it was unclear what the group's norms were, I would now like to discuss improvisation in situations where it is more certain that acting differently might be discordant with the group.

#### Improvisation that requires courage

For me, any discussion of improvisation would not be complete without describing the occasions when I find myself taking a deep breath and plunging into articulating frankly how I see the situation, which I anticipate is in opposition to others present.

Although I have not previously described this element of my practice in this way in my narratives, I have given examples of speaking candidly to both the managing director in project two and Noah in project three. In both of these occasions I was talking to the person who was directly responsible for my employment and raising issues or relating experiences which I knew in one way or another they did not know about or agree with. I was aware I was taking a huge risk doing this and, as I describe in project two, I went ready with my letter of resignation. It seems that this improvisational performance is different in some ways to what has already been described because of the huge risk to identity involved. Therefore in an attempt to understand what is happening in these situations I wish to return to Foucault.

In his later work, Foucault explains the Greek rhetorical concept of *parrhesia*, or fearless speech. *Parrhesiastes* (one who uses *parrhesia*) is “someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse” (2001: 12). He argues that courage is required and acts as proof of the sincerity of the speaker, because what is being said is dangerous, different to what the majority believe and therefore in saying it, one is risking, at the extreme, perhaps life. Whilst I would argue that it would be unlikely within an organisational context that improvisation would be risking life, speaking up to those with superior organisational status, as I described above, or to a majority who you are certain hold the opposite view, is a significant risk to take, perhaps jeopardising one’s livelihood.

The way Foucault describes this theory resonates with my experience, which I have briefly outlined at the start of this section. There are situations in which I become aware of the danger I am putting myself in as my improvisational performance unfolds. However, whereas Foucault seems to locate the use of the rhetorical device, with a *parrhesiastes*, I would be arguing that this still emerges in the conversation of gestures and therefore is not located within a person but within the group. Returning to the description of organisational improvisation presented in the previous section, perhaps it is possible to say that these tend to be more unrehearsed than rehearsed or maybe it would be better to say they become more of a solo performance, where the improviser risks a performance that may not be welcomed by the audience. Due to the risks to identity raised, improvisations of this nature are strong moves in the

organisational game and perhaps the most difficult to anticipate in terms of how they will affect the moves of others. However, whilst I do not want to idealise speaking out as discussed above, I do want to recognise that despite the threats to identity that are raised by making these improvisational moves, possibilities and opportunities are opened up by taking this risk, as reflected in my narratives. Questioning a group's cult values is treacherous but can lead to reinterpretations of those narrative patterns and therefore organisational change.

In order to conclude this argument I want to make sure I have fully explained the improvisational nature of organisational identities and how these are entwined in the organisational game.

#### Organisational identities are social and complex

When we think of organisational identities, we tend to think terms of hierarchy or role, describing people as project managers, or senior customer service assistants. This is the approach I used when explaining who was needed in the team to work with the Roundphase techniques in project one (see page 20) and that Hadida and Tarvainen (2014) and Kamoche et al (2003) use to describe who the audience might be in the previous section. However, I have been arguing that organisational identities are far more complex than a definition of role or one's location on the structure chart and are improvised and interwoven with organisational change in ways that are often not recognised.

Elias' argues "there is no I-identity without a we-identity" (1991: 184) and I am arguing that organisational identifications are not limited to 'environmental health officer' or 'member of the senior leadership team', rather that we also construct identities in companies associated with gender and sexuality. Therefore sexual and gendered aspects of organisational life are ever present. I have discussed a number of ways I understand this to take place. Firstly, through implicit and explicit groupings which have either a gendered identity, for example the men who covet expensive wristwatches or the women who see themselves as better at delivering organisational change, or a sexual identity like LGBT groups. Secondly, because sexual intention emerges between people while at work it means they fall in love,

start extra-marital affairs or sexually harass each other. Thirdly, where aspects associated with being seen as a competent member of the organisation involve entering into displays of femininity or masculinity, for example staying up late drinking or being known to have a mistress. Fourthly, that gossip and speculation about whether people *are* in an intimate relationship can be a powerful way to denigrate them or accuse them of not acting professionally. I am therefore arguing for recognising the existence of a plurality of identities because I believe this is necessary for a more complex understanding of organisational change.

Looking back at the way I described how change occurred when using the Roundphase techniques in project one, I explained that certain people were needed on the team based on their role. This team created a new system of work and if the change was agreed by senior managers, possibly with the support of audit and finance, it was subsequently introduced to the remaining members of the department. I do not believe this is a particularly unusual way of describing organisational change, and similar examples can be found in many change management texts including Argyris (1970) and Deming (2000) for example. However, when interpretations are made about how organisations change, this can often mean drawing conclusions that are both highly generalised and polarised. For example, saying that despite customer services supporting the change, senior managers resisted. I am arguing that it is highly unlikely *all* customer services staff supported it while *all* senior managers did not and viewing the groups in this homogenised, binary way and only in that way, obscures the complexity of the organisational game and the improvisational moves taking place as individuals and groups struggle to get what they want. I am pointing to the fact that these descriptions are too abstract, and ignore relational considerations and the plurality of groups and identities that exist in organisations, and because these are lacking it impedes our ability to understand and explicate organisational change. I believe this complexity is needed. Descriptions of what is happening should include aspects associated with gender and sexuality as well as other relational considerations, as I have in project four and this synopsis, because these influence how change develops.

Seeing the organisation in the way I am advocating permits moving away from polarised descriptions of change, where one group want change while the other

resist, to a more plural interpretation of power relations in organisations. It is then possible to recognise many sites of resistance (Foucault, 1978: 96) and account for the interdependent nature of our relating. This then accords with my experience of working in organisations and how changes actually arise and come about as the many different groups struggle with one another in an attempt to control the game. However, understanding organisations comprise many groups associated with identities not only provides explanations that seem to accord more closely with experience, but also leads to a final thought about organisational improvisation.

I have explained above that during improvisational performances we both maintain and change narrative patterns at the same time. Acknowledging that individuals are members of many groups, means they find themselves having to improvise in ways that attempt to maintain *all* the narrative themes of *all* the groups they claim membership of in order to remain included, which may include groups beyond the organisation. What I am drawing attention to here is that improvising narrative themes in different ways bring people into conflict with each other as they do not agree how this should be done, but it also it brings them into conflict with themselves where they cannot do justice to all the narrative themes of all the groups they claim membership of. I have been to many meetings in organisations that seem to take an unusual turn because someone, who everyone thinks will be against the proposal, suddenly supports it. Whilst this might just be due to misreading the situation, or group influence ahead of the meeting, I am also raising the possibility that the person has found themselves conflicted about how to improvise in accordance with the expectations of *all* the groups that constitute their identity and therefore compromises on this particular proposal, with this particular group. Comprehending how change might arise from improvisational performances such as this are not possible unless a complex picture of social organisational identities is understood.

In summary, at work we are caught up in the organisational game. As groups or individuals struggle with one another to control the game and try to get what they want, they make improvisational moves. These improvisations affect the narrative themes that organise our experience, both changing and sustaining them at the same time through the paradox of the rehearsed and the unrehearsed in the spontaneous moment of performance, where the audience enables and constrains how the

performance plays out. However, narrative themes in organisations are not just about how to give good customer service but also include aspects of identity such as gender and sexuality which are interwoven in organisational life. Improvisations can raise threats to identity as the meanings of narrative patterns are altered. But there are also situations that call out an improvised solo performance. This takes courage as it challenges group norms and in doing so, threatens one's own identity within the group. Taking this view permits a rethinking of how organisational identities are constituted which is far more complex and social than descriptions reliant on structure charts or functional roles, but requires a perspective where all of organisational life, including those associated with gender and sexuality that are often hidden, is to be examined and included.

Before I present my contributions to knowledge and practice, I will go on now to explain the methods I have used in my research.



## Method of research

The design of the DMan programme, which I have been following throughout undertaking my research, is influenced heavily by complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2010; 2011; 2012) including philosophical and sociological theories that contributed to its development, such as Bourdieu (1977; 1990; 2004), Dewey (1938), Elias (1991; 1978; 2000), Foucault (1977; 1973) and Mead (1934; 1938; 1923), together with an understanding of group analysis, informed by Foulkes (1984). The effect on the programme of pragmatic philosophers such as Dewey and Mead requires me to take my everyday work experiences as the object of my study, enquiring rigorously into my practice. It was this focus on experience that attracted me to this particular programme. I had doubts about my pre-existing understanding of how organisational changes arose informed by more orthodox theories of change, as it did not seem congruent with situations I came across in my daily work as a consultant. However, through my research, my thought has moved considerably and I have come to comprehend organisations, how they change and my role as a consultant in a totally different way. Rather than seeing change as logical, planned, predictable and based on systems as I did at the start of my research, through enquiring into my practice, I have come to understand the role improvisation plays in organisations. I understand change is an ongoing process occurring between people in relations of power. Based on my experience, in this thesis I have more fully explained my understanding of processes of improvisation in change management. This has only happened due to the ways in which we work on the programme which are an important aspect of my research method and therefore I would like start this section on methodology, by explaining these aspects of the DMan programme.

### Research on the DMan programme

On the DMan programme all students and supervisors meet altogether regularly four times a year at the residential weekends. As a group of interdisciplinary scholars, exploring ideas, referenced above, from process sociology, pragmatic philosophy, group analysis and complexity science, during the weekends we use a number of techniques to support and develop our understanding of complex responsive processes and the social aspects of organisational life. There are sessions led by

supervisors reviewing literature and developing understanding of key themes that relate to management, change, organisations, ethics or research methods. Following these sessions, there are opportunities for students to then discuss what has been presented both as a whole group but also within small ad hoc groups where students can then relate the topic discussed to their research. Lastly, we work altogether three times each residential when we all sit together in something we term a community meeting. These meetings are not like meetings in organisations where there is a clear agenda, a chair and prepared reports to discuss, rather everyone sits together in a circle and anyone can raise and talk about whatever they think is important (Mowles, 2017: 7-8). The conversation emerges between us, as improvised gestures and responses create and recreate narrative themes for the group. Perhaps we will find ourselves discussing people who have joined or left the community, how we work together, what is required to complete a thesis or talking about the theme of the residential weekend and how that relates to issues within our own organisations. Sometimes we sit in a period of silence. Importantly you can never know what will be discussed and this is the purpose of the community meeting to experience and be reminded of the uncertain social nature of interaction between people that is happening all the time in organisations, but is normally covered over by the formalised settings or prescriptions adopted. It has been extremely helpful to me in my enquiry to understand that although we are always improvising our responses and the same gesture can evoke many different responses across a group, there is a clear difference between this improvised action that is taking place all the time and innovations, where the understanding of a narrative theme alters in some way.

As well as working altogether in the large group, the programme subdivides students and supervisors into learning sets. These are normally groups of two to four students with the first and second supervisor. The role of the learning set is very important, particularly when adopting a narrative research method as we are encouraged to do on the programme. At the residential weekends we have learning set meetings, where we talk about the themes of the residential weekend but also present and discuss our research to each other and our supervisors. Having circulated the research in advance the learning set is an opportunity to understand and talk about the different responses provoked by your research and support the development of a reflexive approach to the research, which is further explained below. Between

residential weekends we also share our research progress and have a discussion together over Skype. In doing this, the programme and the students on the programme are taking seriously the aspects of complex responsive processes that reject ideas of autonomous individuals developing thoughts but rather are demonstrating the interdependent nature of human interaction that supports the movement and development of thought within the research community. It also brings multiple perspectives to your work, which makes it more rigorous and provides the ability to generalise beyond one's individual view. However, I also accept that whilst these techniques bring into the research consideration of many other possible interpretations of my narratives, it would never be possible to take into account all potential views they evoke. For example, through the examination of this thesis, it has been suggested to me that one reason Lewis, Logan and Harry might have been in conflict with the senior management in Project three could have been to do with different ideological stances to privatisation. Whether that particular issue had an influence on how they played the game or not, my research is about my experience of how this conflict played out. It is not possible to know the reasons as if they were incontrovertible facts but understanding and examining how myself and others made sense of what was happening at the time, and therefore how we made our moves in the game, are affected by the interpretations we made, which I have described and form the basis of my research. Having explained some of the structure and techniques adopted on the DMan programme designed to support our research (Mowles, 2017), I would now like to examine in detail some of the other methodological aspects I have adopted.

#### The challenge of researching management consultancy, moving away from abstractions

Lapsley and Oldfield state that “little is known about the practices of management consultants in the public sector” (2001: 523). In my experience, management consulting in the public sector is led by large consultancy firms, such as the one I worked for previously, KPMG or McKinsey. Often the methodologies they use are commercially sensitive and contracts with clients include clauses prohibiting the replication of their tools and techniques. This may be a contributing factor to the lack of understanding about what is happening in consultants' work. However,

irrespective of the sector I think it can be very difficult to fully comprehend what it is that happens with clients on a daily basis, which was why when I started my research I could not see the improvisational nature of my practice. I believe there is a tendency to abstract and simplify action, particularly to relate action to abstract models, relating experience as something like ‘today I took the team through the fourth step of the model from which they calculated the cost of the current service’. Drawing attention to abstracted descriptions such as this, I am referring to what often happens in a similar way to Mowles, “Instead of simplifying I am pointing to the fact that everyday life in organisations is complex and uncertain” (2011: 15). Therefore rather than simply describe my interactions with clients as certain, I have in my research attempted to reflect the complexity and uncertainty of taking part in organisational life and reduce reliance on describing consulting practice in terms of abstractions. I have attempted not to remove too much detail and rely on models and techniques as the causes of organisational change but rather open up for examination the relational nature of interacting with clients in order to understand the ongoing social processes involved in organisational change. In order to try to answer Lapsley and Oldfield’s challenge and to understand and research what it is we are doing together when engaged in working with organisations, I have adopted a reflexive, experience-based, narrative methodology for my research. I would therefore like to take each of those elements in turn in order to elaborate exactly what I mean.

### Using narrative methodology

I have chosen to use a narrative approach to research my experience because, as Fonseca suggests, and as discussed above, experience is interaction, which is patterned by narrative themes (2002: 73). Czarniawska says “a student of social life, no matter of which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as a form of social life, a form of knowledge, and a form of communication” (2004: 13). As I am researching my experience it seems appropriate therefore to use narratives as a way of conducting my research, generating ‘data’ and communicating with my reader my understanding, reason and sense of the social situations I am finding myself in. However as Squire et al (2013: 1) point out narrative research methods are not clearly defined. There is no agreed definition of narrative and neither are there understood ways to analyse data, unlike in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss,

1967), explained below, nor are there guidelines about suitable materials or where it is legitimate to find stories to use in analysis. Despite this they point out that the qualities that narratives “carry traces of human lives that we want to understand” (ibid: 2) outweigh the disadvantages which I shall turn to next.

One of the most obvious questions that could be raised is about the reliability of narratives or stories, in other words, to question if they are a valid source of data. Kearney describes a story as a “creative re-description of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold” (2002: 12). Rhodes and Brown draw attention to the problem that this leads to, which is that a number of possible interpretations could be taken from them (2005: 167). Indeed in my synopsis I have highlighted alternative interpretations that I have subsequently made from my original narratives in my projects. However, when I was authoring my projects initially and selecting and analysing narratives of my experience, I started by recounting something about my work in organisations that was puzzling or particularly interesting (Brinkmann, 2012: 39). I then considered a range of other interpretations that could be made, supported by discussions and responses received from supervisors and students from within my learning set and developing many drafts of each project before settling on the final version that emerges as most persuasive. For example, understanding improvisation in the way I have, has only occurred due to the qualities of narratives and the interactive experience I have engaged in through my research. By working intensively in a community of engaged inquirers within the DMan programme as described above, I have been able to reflect on what it is that I am actually doing with clients. It is not just the narratives that are enriched by working together in the learning set it is also the ways the narratives are analysed. For example, originally project two was focussed on organisational learning and exploring the ideas of Bateson (1972); Chin and Benne (1985) and Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) whereas it finally ended up, as presented earlier in this thesis, to being primarily concerned with attempts at innovation, therefore reference to these authors became obsolete to my argument. In order to make the steps I have taken to produce this thesis clear, I would like to explain and examine where what I have done is similar or different to other methods. I will begin now with considerations of ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods.

### Ethnography, autoethnography and narrative

Ethnographic methods are common to anthropology and usually involve the researcher involving themselves with a group for the purposes of observing and studying the group to understand and write about its culture, power structure and worldviews. This activity is often called fieldwork and it is common that the researcher makes comprehensive field notes from which to base research findings. Coming from the outside it is anticipated that the researcher will be able to bring new perspectives to the group's meanings and behaviours (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002: 49). In discussions of ethnography both Easterby-Smith et al (ibid) and Brinkmann (2012: 44) refer to the work of Agar (1986) who presents the idea of breakdowns as key to qualitative ethnographic enquiry. Breakdowns occur as a consequence of encountering things that are not understood from the researchers current understanding, so that resolving them therefore develops new understandings. Closely related to ethnography is autoethnography. Whereas in ethnography the researcher usually presents themselves as a detached observer, autoethnography "allows researchers to draw on their own experience to understand a particular phenomenon or culture" (Méndez, 2013: 280) and was in part developed as a response to criticisms of ethnographic research where this was left out. Autoethnography often involves narratives of self and it is this which provides both its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of using personal narratives to understand a researchers own experiences has to be weighed up against a researcher's willingness to honestly self-disclose and the temptation for narratives of self to become self obsessed or lead towards narcissism (ibid: 282-283).

The way I have approached writing my narratives shares something with autoethnography (Anderson, 2006: 378), because they are self-narratives within which I include myself and take seriously that I am part of the social interactions that take place. My method also differs from some forms of autoethnography, because I include discussion of other people's views, or my understanding of them within my narratives and is therefore not purely a self narration. I have also not included creative forms of writing like novels and poems (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012: 112) like some auto-ethnographers do. There are many narratives of my experience that could be selected for inclusion in a project. In deciding those to choose, I have

always selected stories where it is not immediately understandable to me what is taking place, there is a mystery or, returning to the ideas of Agar (1986), a breakdown of some kind. My actions or the actions of others at work, arouse my curiosity and this helps me to think about how, why and where processes of improvisation are taking place. This has become my “original haunting question” (Cook, 1993: 48) quoting Dewey and therefore the central object of my research.

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a method of research developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and is generally a more prescribed method than ethnography and autoethnography. Rather than start with a theory and test that by collecting data as would be typical of natural science methods, grounded theory starts with collecting data and then develops theory from it. Usually there is a question that supports the researcher to develop data collection proposals. Easterby-Smith et al (2002: 46-47) use the example that a grounded theory approach might be taken to research organisational appraisal interviews. Data would be collected from a number of different firms and different managers within those firms to then identify theories about appraisal interviews that are therefore found to be common to all those studied. Whilst in my research I am starting with a question, and therefore my research shares this element of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the way I examine and treat my ‘data’ is not consistent with this theory as it is not formulaic, does not rely on verbatim notes or interview transcripts but is open and allows creative interpretations. Not allowing for these are the main sources of criticism about grounded theory; because it disregards emotional aspects from research it is therefore arguably not able to adequately represent reality (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009: 66-67). Before I summarise how I have used narratives to support my research, I want to describe how my narratives are based on experience and why this is important.

### Research based on Experience

Dewey believed that “all genuine education comes about through experience” (1938: 25). For him and other pragmatist philosophers examining experience was essential for understanding the truth of the world. I have therefore been writing and enquiring

into my experience of some of the work situations I find myself in. Unlike the tradition of the natural sciences therefore, my narratives are not written from the perspective of an external outside observer looking at the organisation as an object of study, but include descriptions of the situations I am in and the sense I am making of them. This is in contrast to case study methods or ethnomethodology that usually and largely preserve the position “of the objective observer, where the researcher’s emotions and fantasies are to be kept out of the research” (Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 2). Including myself, my thoughts and actions is important in order to fulfil the final element of my approach, which is reflexivity.

### A Reflexive approach to research

To be reflexive is to try to understand the thoughts, actions and reactions I bring to my research, and the processes of interaction that give rise to them. In other words reflexivity is thinking about how you are thinking and therefore being reflexive in my research is a way of trying to recognise what my taken for granted assumptions and interpretations might be and to challenge them.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009: 271-280) talk about ways to increase your ability to be reflexive by extensive reading, adopting a breadth and variation in interpretation and the role of metatheory (by which they mean the “power of institutionalized structures and dominant ideologies” [ibid: 276] to influence the researcher.) I am therefore being reflexive by reading not only literature from the DMan reading list but also research specific to my enquiry. For example the literature I have reflected on gender in organisations, jazz and improvisational theatre are all unique to my explorations and are therefore not on the DMan main reading list. Other ways I try to increase my reflexivity are through learning from sessions led by faculty at residential weekends, being open to, listening and understanding others’ interpretations and critiques of my research to understand my assumptions and their impact on noticing what emerges as I encounter insights into my research. However, my primary way of being reflexive is by sharing my work regularly with people who can draw my attention to ways my own thoughts about the world are influencing my interpretations. To enhance reflexivity I regularly submit my work and read and respond to other learning set members’ work. Reading their responses to my work,



and the responses evoked in me by their writing, often highlights new ways of thinking about my research. It draws my attention to how meta-theory has influenced my understanding of the literature I have read and I do the same for others. I have also shared my research with colleagues and clients. This has helped me to take the ethical aspects of my research seriously and understand if they share similar or different thoughts about experiences we have shared, supporting further reflection about my practice. I believe, therefore, I am taking a reflexive approach to writing and interpreting my narratives, through listening to the reactions of others, some of whom are present in the situations I have written about, understanding alternative interpretations that could be made but also ensuring my narratives resonate with the experience of others (Stacey and Griffin, 2005: 27). This aids reflexivity and the ability to understand the generalisability of my interpretations and therefore the contribution my research is making to understanding organisational improvisation.

However despite these actions, the ways in which my highly individualised narratives are generalisable could still be raised as a challenge to my chosen methodology. Are these stories and arguments about my consulting experience of interest to others and if so in what ways and how would I describe these? My justification for making generalisable claims is two-fold, firstly it is about resonance with others. Have my narratives and interpretations called out similar responses in others (Mead, 1934) as they do in myself? I believe they do. Having shared and discussed my work widely with many students and colleagues they can see themselves in what I have written and talk to me about similar circumstances. In which case I am describing experience that anyone could recognise in organisational life and it is therefore generalisable. Secondly, I would say that these accounts of organisational life could only call out these shared responses *because* of the specificity with which I have written them. If the narratives were highly abstracted, not only would I have been unable to understand how gender and sexuality are intertwined with organisational life, I would not have been able to explain this in a way others also recognise.

### Methodological Summary

I have undertaken this research following a reflexive experienced-based narrative methodology. I have done this in a thoroughly social way, involving and inviting many people to read and comment on my work to understand if it resonates with colleagues I have worked with, other practitioners in my field and through the DMan programme a community of researchers who may or may not understand my work on a daily basis. Primarily I have therefore approached my research through writing narratives of my experience and, with the help of others and extensive reading, becoming increasingly more reflexive about my practice and how I understand what I am doing in the organisations I am working with. Writing the projects sequentially and presenting them in this way in thesis demonstrates clearly the movement and progression of both my practice and understanding from project one through to four. I have then taken a further reflexive turn in my synopsis using my previous projects again as ‘data’ from which to bring together the detailed understanding of processes of improvisation in organisations I have presented here.

Before I describe my contributions to knowledge and practice I would like to set out some ethical considerations associated with adopting this methodology and conducting my research in the way that I have.

## **Ethical considerations**

Using the type of methodology described above, going through iterative loops of using theory and reflexivity to understand and reflect on a narrative, invariably leads to bringing in stories of events that are at times quite unexpected and that you could not have predicted. This leads to difficult ethical questions about how to carry out the research, for it is not always possible to know in advance who you will find yourself writing about and which events will become the subject of my research. Owning my own company, working directly with some clients as well as having subcontracted work through a larger consultancy firm, adds further complications and difficulties, as there are a huge number of people who I have worked with or come into contact with over the four years of my research that I could include in my writing. Aware that as soon as I started my research anything that was happening at work may be brought into one of my narratives, but at the same time aware that as far as possible I did not want to make anyone feel uncomfortable or scare them into refusing to work with me, I have systematically but opportunistically seized moments as they have presented themselves to talk with colleagues and clients about my research. In effect I have improvised in the moment in order to make sure that I have adequately discussed my research with those who might be included.

However, it is not always the case that appropriate chances to include my research in the flow of conversation present themselves. Sometime I have had to make a deliberate attempt to talk about it and arrange a specific meeting. Nevertheless, I feel that everyone who is featured in my projects, and a good many more besides, are all aware of what I am doing and the way I have been going about it.

During my conversations with colleagues and clients, I have always offered to share my work with them and ask for their response, whether they are featured in the projects or not. Some have taken me up on the offer and others have not. Those that have taken the time to read through my projects and respond to what I have written, as I said earlier, have provided me with invaluable insights and alternative perspectives about what they remember experiencing or what they thought was going on, which has helped me to think more reflexively and in some ways validate my research.

There is also the question of anonymity. I have changed the names of all people so that it is not possible to recognise individuals who feature in my research, systematically changing each name in order of appearance starting from project one and replacing it with the names from the most popular first forenames in Scotland (National Records of Scotland, 2016). I have also anonymised the names of companies that appear within my thesis, where appropriate using a random company name generator (Gamborg, 2017). Whilst randomness in itself is no guarantee of anonymity it obviates a temptation to, for example, keep the first letter of a person's name the same or choose names that are similar. This makes it easier for the researcher to remember who is who but risks revealing the identity of the person written about as it might bring them to the minds of others if the names presented in the narratives are not significantly different and I have chosen, therefore, to adopt a randomisation method for the names featured in my thesis.

That said, the consulting technique that I used in my practice, and therefore write about in my early projects, uses a particular version of systems thinking that I have referenced to the originator, who is also the managing director of the consulting company I subcontracted work from. This creates a further ethical dilemma because merely changing the name of the company and the people featured in my narratives, will not guarantee anonymity as it might be possible to deduce the company as there are only a very few firms who would use the particular tools and techniques that I have referenced. This problem is compounded by the accessibility of my professional work history and experience through the internet. A simple Google search might name most if not all of the companies I have worked for and with. I feel therefore that it would be almost impossible to write about events with enough specificity to adequately conduct my research and at the same time to totally guarantee the anonymity of the companies and possibly some of the people I have worked with. I have resolved this by making them aware of my research and if they wish, discussing what I have written.

Whilst it is very important to recognise the ethical considerations of undertaking my research, because I have been enquiring into my practice this cannot be separated from ethical considerations associated with the influence my studies have had on my work. I often reflect now about the extent to which the way I approach consulting

has been transformed from implementing abstract tools and techniques ‘onto’ the organisation to becoming involved with people in the organisation to try to develop change. That is not to say that previously I was not in relation to members of the organisation but I would have seen these relationships as necessary to securing agreement to execute the change, rather than supporting change itself. Whilst I do not want to idealise my practice now compared to previously, I find it hard not to argue that I am far more aware of the ethical considerations and implications of what I am doing in organisations. Whereas before I was following standardised prescriptions and paying little attention to the ethical considerations of how these then played out, I now openly discuss with clients what the implications of certain approaches or desired changes might be, based on my knowledge of the social and relational nature of the organisations I am working with.

## **Conclusions and contribution**

Through writing, sharing and interpreting narratives of my experience of working with clients as a management consultant, I have been able to understand processes of improvisation in organisations and how these relate to my practice. This has involved seeing the complexity of everyday life at work, a complicatedness which is often covered over, or somehow seen as separate and not important to achieving whatever it is that is trying to be done. However, exploring my participation with others has led me to argue that it is important to recognise the plurality of narrative patterns we are creating and maintaining as we communicate together in organisations because this is also part of doing the work.

This perspective of organisations, how they change and my involvement as a consultant, is very different from my understanding at the start of my research and what I anticipated as the outcome from my studies. Whilst I was sceptical about the ubiquitous nature of the tools and techniques I was using in the management consultancy, I assumed that through examining flaws in the approach, I would make recommendations about alternatives. However, I now find the confidence I had in the tools and techniques to bring about organisational change totally misplaced. That is not to say that they do not have a place or that consultants should never use them, as they bring credibility through claims of membership with groups of people who also use or have used those particular tools and techniques. Indeed many organisations have strong affiliations with one particular tool and recognising and working with that narrative pattern is part of engaging in the organisational game. But the assumptions about organisations and how they change that come with such tools and techniques now leads me to argue that they cannot be seen as the mechanism through which change arises. Rather, that at work we are caught up in an ongoing organisational game. Interdependent people who are in relations of power to one another are consciously and unconsciously making attempts to try to control the game and get what they want. These moves are improvisational performances.

### Contribution to knowledge

I am arguing for a new understanding of organisational improvisation, which I shall go on to explain fully. Based on a thoroughly social way of comprehending communication from Mead (1923; 1934), I see improvisational performances as emerging in the ongoing everyday interactions in organisations. However, I am bringing insight about ‘what’ in organisations is being improvised and how this is taking place. As well as recognising that a function of improvisation is to keep things appearing the same as much as it is to change them, I am therefore saying that improvisation should not be synonymous with transformation.

Whilst still using metaphors from jazz and improvised theatre, as many authors of organisational improvisation do, I am also including elements outwith those analogies to describe improvisation, for example those that involve rhetoric to persuade, manipulate or seduce others. Together with bringing in the work of Judith Butler to understand the improvisational nature of aspects of gender and sexuality, I am arguing that these are bound up with our work lives more than is often recognised and influence how organisational change occurs.

I am arguing from a position which assumes that organisations are made up from many groups of interdependent people whose experience is organised through narrative patterns which are being constantly created and recreated through improvisational moves within the organisational game. These narrative patterns are never universal or fixed. Although there maybe a felt unified sense of understanding in an organisation about what or how a particular theme plays out, it is always malleable, nuanced and ambiguous and therefore subject to change through improvisation. Whereas in improvised theatre and jazz there are judgements about what constitutes good or bad performances, in organisations there is no equivalent. There is no viewpoint from which any attempt to change or not can be viewed as good or bad, correct or incorrect because it is part of the thrust, feint and parry of organisational life that different people would have different views about what should or should not be changing and recognising that plurality is an important part of the way I am advocating organisational change should be understood. Seeing the interdependent nature of our relating and understanding we are caught up in social

games within relations of power mean there is no certainty about how improvisational moves play out. They may or may not result in reinterpretations of narrative themes. If they do, we can say improvisation has led to innovation as something new has emerged.

My research into processes of improvisation in organisations makes a contribution to the literature about organisational change and improvisation at work as well as adding to the theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

Firstly, I am challenging the systems thinking literature about change (Seddon, 2003; 2008; Middleton, 2010) by arguing that organisational change is not controlled by management consultants, who can redesign how everyone in an organisation works and achieve a predictable result. Rather, that organisational change arises through relational improvisational performances as individuals and groups struggle to play and control the organisational game as attempts to get what they want. What actually happens is not in any one person's control as the outcome of each individual move is inherently uncertain.

Secondly, I am adding to literature on organisational improvisation (Barrett, 1998a; Barrett, 1998b; Cunha, Cunha and Kamoche, 1999; Hadida and Tarvainen, 2014; Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha, 2003; Vendelø, 2009) by developing a theory of improvisation based on Mead's (1934) model of communication and Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1988; 2006; 2011). This relational understanding of improvisation means that organisational improvisation is not solely about changing working practices, but also about maintaining and altering all narrative themes that organise our experience at work. This is a far broader definition of improvisation which includes recognising a plurality of organisational identities that therefore moves away from seeing or making interpretations based on binary structures, whether they are associated with gender, sexuality or advocates of change versus resisters and many others.

Thirdly, as discussed at length in project four, despite the emphasis in complex responsive processes of the importance of diversity in human local interaction there is no consideration in the theory about the heterogeneous nature of our gendered and



sexed bodies that interact with each other and how this influences what happens at work. I am therefore making a contribution to complex responsive processes of relation theory (Stacey, 2011; 2006; Stacey and Mowles, 2016) by recognising that in my everyday work experiences I work with a plurality of identities associated with different ways group identity is being displayed and enacted. These are in no way fixed or binary and emerge as ways of negotiating or demonstrating group membership, in other words ways of being included rather than excluded. Patterns associated with gender are very strong narrative themes that organise experience and therefore often appear or are taken to be simple. However, I am arguing that this is not the case, rather it is important to recognise that it is not just one body gesturing and responding to another but one *sexed and gendered* body gesturing and responding to another sexed and gendered body and this affects our interactions, assumptions and understanding of what it is we are doing together. I am arguing that the narrative themes that emerge from these improvisations become entangled in work life including what it means to be seen as competent at work.

My second contribution to the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating pertains to providing a detailed understanding of organisational improvisation. Whilst I agree with Stacey that improvisation is taking place all the time between people in organisations (2006: 124) and is an undertaking “which is certainly not haphazard, impulsive or thoughtless activity, but highly complex, skilled performances of interdependent people” (ibid: 138), I do not believe he describes organisational improvisation in detail, in the way I have above. However, Friis does attempt to do this, also coming from a complexity perspective, he describes improvisation as either to do with repetitive or spontaneous acts (2006: 86-87). My argument, on the other hand, is that improvisation in organisations seeks to both maintain and change narrative themes of organising simultaneously. These are not repetitive *or* spontaneous acts but both at the same time, which emerge through the paradox of the rehearsed and the unrehearsed at the spontaneous moment of performance. Anticipation of an audience’s reaction, which I am saying is represented by Mead’s concept of the generalised other (1934: 154), both enables and constrains one’s performance. However, the audience can also call out a solo performance, where the risk to one’s organisational identity is greatest. These improvisations are dangerous because of what is at stake when one challenges

idealised narrative patterns of a group, but these risks may also open up possibilities and opportunities as a result of questioning the meaning of a group's ideologies.

Having set out my original contribution to knowledge I would now like to turn to my contribution to practice.

### Contribution to practice

I could argue that the development of my contribution to practice is simply the organisational implementation of my contribution to knowledge, because if there is no separation between theory and practice, this would hold true. Certainly as is demonstrated through the progressive difference in my approach to my work outlined in projects one through to four as my understanding has evolved, so has my practice. So in making this contribution to practice the central question must be, how has my research enabled a different approach to my consulting work?

Whereas at the start of my research I supported clients to use the Roundphase tools and techniques to change their organisation, which I would have argued strongly was a system, I now see my role quite differently. Rather than assume that every problem faced by the organisation could be solved by the Roundphase tools, I do not use these tools and techniques anymore. This is because the tools are imbued with assumptions about organisations, and how they change, that I no longer believe represent my experience of organisational change and therefore I feel it is unethical to use them in my practice. For example, to use the tools I would have to give clients certainty about the improvements that would be delivered and how long it would take to secure these. However, I no longer believe that I alone can control what happens and therefore I would find it impossible to have these conversations. Therefore, how is a management consultant like myself to approach their work?

I would say that my practice is now typified by reducing an emphasis on the influence I can have as a management consultant whilst trying to continuously understand the cult narrative themes of the organisation and ways in which people's improvisational performances are creating and recreating these organisational routines. If the CEO hires me to alter or change a particular pattern, I will, through

talking with as many people as possible in the organisation, understand the history of how narrative patterns have come to be the way they are and identify which groups might be supportive of the change and those that might resist. Of course in order to be included in these groups I have to improvise in ways that are consistent with their narrative patterns and therefore both my personal and organisational identities might be altered by this experience. But I believe that to be successful in my job I have to let myself go a little otherwise I will remain on the periphery with no influence in the organisational game. Whilst none of these actions guarantee the desired change will happen in the way the CEO desires, changes will arise through the ongoing improvisational performances that emerge in our interactions together.

#### Limitations and opportunities for further research

I believe there are some limitations to my research and these come from the fact that I have explored organisational improvisation from a management consultancy basis in the UK and as described in the introduction, I have not adopted a fully intersectional approach examining all aspects of identity. Therefore, the understanding I have developed here might be different for a number of reasons associated with, firstly, the transient nature of consultancy. For example, alternative interpretations might be developed if I was a permanent full-time employee or was a long-standing member of an organisation.

Secondly, if I was either a consultant or employee in another country different cultural aspects of habitus would likely influence understanding and consideration of improvisation. This would be due to particular social norms which are routinely enacted differently from a UK setting, for example those associated with how and who can say what openly in organisations. This provides two clear opportunities for further research leading on from this exploration of improvisation. Firstly, whether organisational improvisation could be described in the same way in different cultural or organisational settings. In other words, would alternative understandings be developed if I had been a full time long standing member of an organisation or a management consultant in another country and would these enrich the insights presented here?

Secondly, I have explored improvised aspects of identity associated with gender and sexuality, but I have not used a comprehensive intersectional methodology. I wish to recognise that our identities can not be separated; for example, I am not only a woman, I am a white woman and my understanding and interpretations presented in my research will be influenced by aspects of identity I have not explored, such as class and race. I believe that that looking at other aspects of identity in organisational improvisation would be an opportunity for further research. In Hersch's book about jazz he describes how in New Orleans, jazz became bound up with "individuals [ability] to negotiate their racial identities and the constraints on racial boundary crossings" (2007: 9). I would therefore suggest that broadening my research presented here by taking a wider intersectional approach could lead to further insights about organisational improvisation and intersectional ways to understand organisational change.

#### Publishing considerations

I would like to seek opportunities to publish my work. Both the insights about organisation improvisation, which might be appropriate for the Journal of Change Management or Journal of Organizational Change Management, and also my understanding of the intertwined nature of gendered and sexual identities at work, perhaps through Gender, Work and Organization or Gender in Management.

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